

HYPATIA'S LOVER

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Hypatia c.370 – c.415 AD

(Imaginary portrait, from *Little Journeys to the Homes of Great Teachers* by
Elbert Hubbard (New York: Roycrafters), 1908,)

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Foreword and Acknowledgements

This is a fictionalized account of the last days of Hypatia's life, leading to her brutal murder during Lent, 415 AD. The tragic tale is followed by a collection of imaginary excerpts from lectures and speeches of Hypatia.

The little that is known of Hypatia's life and work is readily accessible on the internet. (See the rich resource page maintained by Howard A. Landman: <http://www.polyamory.org/~howard/Hypatia/>.) The classical source is the Life of Hypatia by Socrates Scholasticus, a contemporary of Hypatia, in his *Ecclesiastical History*. The Suda Lexicon, the 10th century encyclopedia, has a long entry on Hypatia, which apparently assembles uncritically material from conflicting earlier sources without any attempt at reconciling them. In the story line I have not tampered with any known facts.

The myth of Isis and Osiris, of which I make considerable use, is also readily accessible on the internet in various versions. (See for instance: <http://www.akhet.co.uk/isisosir.htm>, http://www.ctio.noao.edu/instruments/ir_instruments/osiris2soar/tale.html, and <http://www.egyptianmyths.net/mythisis.htm>. The rendition given here is mine.

For the quotations from Plotinus I have used the English translation of Elmer O'Brien, S.J. (*The Essential Plotinus*, 1964). The citations are noted at the end of the book.

I am indebted to Theodor Gomperz for the reference to the trinity of Zeus, Athena, and Apollo in Homer. See Theodor Gomperz, *The Greek Thinkers*, Volume 1, translated by Laurie Magnus, 1901, pp.106-7.

Finally, I have to confess to a plagiarism, though perhaps a pardonable one, since I have only plagiarized myself. For Hypatia's 'lectures' on the *Parmenides* of Plato (pp.60-67 below) I have used the substance of Chapter 8 of my *Plato: An Interpretation* (2005).

As is evident from the preceding lines, the philosophy I ascribe to Hypatia is confessedly my own. Since, thanks to the Church, Hypatia's works have been completely lost to us, I may perhaps be forgiven a fabrication rendered innocuous by this explicit avowal. In any case, it is known that Hypatia's

philosophy was Platonic/Neoplatonic, and I describe my own philosophy as a version of Platonism.

If anyone should take offence at the way I have pictured Hypatia's tragedy, I have no apology and no regret. Hypatia's atrocious slaughter is a sore wound in the human conscience that must be kept smarting if it is not to fester and poison the whole human body.

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Sixth-October City, Egypt
September 2006

Alexandria, 415 AD

HYPATIA'S LOVER

1.

Hypatia did not take her carriage for going to the School. She rarely used her carriage for the journey to the School or back home. Partly out of regard for Christophoros, her old driver who, as her parents used to tell her, came into the service of the family the day she was born, and partly because she took pleasure in walking to the School. Even during the cold season between the months of Tybi and Pharmuti, except on days when the weather was particularly harsh, she enjoyed her daily promenade. Mornings she would stroll, meditating or simply giving herself up to the contented feeling of just being alive. At the end of the day, she would leave the School grounds surrounded by a group of her students and walk leisurely, answering their questions or happily listening to them arguing among themselves or commenting on the lecture she had given earlier in the day. She would say jokingly to her Aristotelean colleagues, "I am a peripatetic too, you know, but only in the etymological sense of the word."

Hypatia walked briskly. The cool breeze from the Mediterranean heightened the cheer that permeated her whole being. She was elated, having just formed a brilliant idea for her new course of lectures. For a moment there flickered in her mind, not a memory, but a re-lived moment that took her some twenty years back when she was just beginning her teaching career. At that time, with all the fire of youth she fell in love and lived days of happiness before the experience turned sour. She quickly shook that thought off. At the moment it was the exuberance of the new-born thought for her oncoming lectures that inundated her soul.

The mystic insight in the myth of Isis and Osiris and the metaphysical insight in the philosophy of Plato, not least in the *Parmenides*, throw light on each other. Together they give us a rich philosophy of being and becoming. The myth, the thought of Plato, and the thought of Plotinus give

expression in different ways to the same insight. We can also find the same insight in some Christian literature. And it is insight that philosophy is all about, not truth, which is a meretricious chimera. At this thought Hypatia permitted herself a congratulatory wink. This was one of her favourite themes and the expression was one she sometimes made use of to tease her Aristotelean friends.

On her way she passed by her regular stationer, Levi, a kindly old Jew, who not only supplied her with writing materials, but also from time to time offered her a valuable manuscript. Sometimes she would tease the old man saying, "I inherited you from my father, you know." When Theon, her father, was head of the Alexandria Museion, he too would buy his stationery and an occasional manuscript at Levi's shop.

Hypatia arrived at the School and went straight to her lecture-room where she knew her students would already be assembled. She greeted and they returned her greeting. She scanned the room with her eyes. All her favourite students were there. For a few moments she was silent, looking for the right words to broach the subject.

"When I last promised you we will next try to reflect on the philosophy of being and becoming," Hypatia spoke softly, "I had in mind to take Plato's *Timaeus* as a basis. But I believe I have found a more fruitful approach. If we consider our ancient Egyptian *muthos* of Isis and Osiris along with Plato's *Parmenides* and try to interpret Plato's profound and seemingly enigmatic dialogue in terms of the myth and conversely to interpret the myth allegorically in the light of the *Parmenides*, fertilizing all that with the thought of Plotinus, I believe we will arrive at an enlightening outlook on the problem of being and becoming." At this point she could not resist the temptation to fling an impish dart at her Aristotelean friends: she added, "A more enlightening outlook than we can find in Aristotle's treatise on generation and corruption."

"I will seek to show that in the age-old mythology of humankind – Indian, Persian, Hebrew, Egyptian, Greek – we can find intimations of profound metaphysical insight. I intend also to suggest that all metaphysical insight, up to the most highly abstract philosophical thought, can only find expression in myth. Further, I maintain that myth, however originally rich in metaphysical or moral insight, turns into deadly superstition when its mythical nature is ignored, as it is ignored in established, institutionalized religions. Indeed, I venture to say that religion may be defined as institutionalized superstition."

After another short pause, her students breathless, she continued, "We will first look at the ancient myth in its traditional form, then discuss what I call

its first-level symbolism, before going into deeper waters.” Hypatia surveyed her class, resting her eyes on one of the girls, “Isis, you carry the name of the goddess. You must have heard and read the *muthos* tens of times. Tell us how it goes in outline.”

Isis took a while to collect her thoughts. “I suppose,” she said “I am to give the bare story without any interpretation.” “Give us the bare story first,” answered Hypatia, “then you can give your interpretation. We will all take part in exploring what meaning we may find in the *muthos*.”

Isis was again silent for a while. Then she spoke slowly, “Of course, over generations, the original myth received many amplifications and was repeated in various versions. Some of our colleagues here may be familiar with the Hellenized version given by Plutarch. I will try to repeat the story as I used to hear it from my grandfather when I was a little child, but I will have to skip many episodes and leave many gaps in the tale. To my grandfather it was not a myth or story but a sacred legend. I believe that to our forefathers such legends afforded communion with profound mystic realities. Our sceptical age ..” — she glanced at Sophia to her right before adding, “or not so sceptical, seeing the proliferation of new dogmatic faiths among us.” Sophia was one of two Christian students in the class; the other one was Mariam. Isis waved her hand apologetically. “I am sorry. I was told to give the bare *muthos* without interpretation and here I am going into commentary.” Hypatia smiled. “It’s all right. What are we here for if not, in Plato’s immortal phrase, to follow the wind of thought wherever it leads?”

Isis began to recite in pseudo-rhapsodical fashion:

Before Time was,
There was Ra and his heavenly consort Nut.
And Nut bore of children four:
Osiris and Isis, Seth and Nephthys.
When Ra and Nut retired to the upper regions
Osiris and his sister-consort Isis ruled all the land;
And there was plenty and all life was blissful.
But Seth said: I have a mission assigned me by my Father,
For my Father named me Destroyer;
And my Father decreed Osiris and Isis shall not unopposed be.
Seth sought counsel with his sister-consort Nephthys;
And resourceful Nephthys devised a cunning plan:
Have a casket wrought, she said, of wondrous stuff and make,
Nicely to the measure of Osiris answering.
Invite then your royal brother to a banquet regal.

In the banquet hall display the exquisite box;
Declare it shall be your princely gift
To whomever it shall prove exactly fitting.
When it is the turn of majestic Osiris to try,
Promptly drop the heavy lid to trap the King within.
Quickly fasten it with nails and seal it with molten lead,
Then entrust the chest with Osiris held within
To the waters of Hapi the Nile-god
To be carried to the great Open Green Sea.
And so it was.

The moment the evil deed was done
In her chamber wise Queen Isis saw the air turn red.
And a flaming shaft through her tender heart sped.
The goddess rushed out, her heart pounding.
She changed herself into a swallow;
Southwards she flew till Abydos,
Scanning the valley on either side the Nile,
But no sign of her divine spouse she spied.
Northwards to Thebes she returned.
At Thebes Isis descended in human form.
There a kindly old peasant told her
A wondrous chest was seen carried by the waters northwards.
Onwards Isis flew.

At the head of the Delta she paused and descended anew,
Pondering which arm of the branching Nile to follow.
Little children playing answered her eager query:
They had seen the chest floating down the left-hand stream.
Onwards the divine swallow flew.
She stopped where the fresh waters join the brine.
Once again little children showed the goddess the way,
And to Byblos the goddess now turned

On the shore of Byblos she wandered
Till her eye caught three maidens bathing in the sea.
Naked the maidens emerged from the murmuring waves.
At once in the chaste innocence of their bare beauty
Isis lived anew Osiris' nuptial embrace
And promptly divined where her beloved lay.

Her heart brimmed with tenderness;
She beacons to the maidens three;
They came and sat on the golden sands at her feet.
She braided the hair of every one of the maidens three.

At the palace Queen Astarte hardly recognized her maidens;
She marvelled at their beaming eyes,
Marvelled at the fragrance breathed by their forms.
To their Queen the maidens related the wondrous tale.
To the palace the wandering goddess was conducted.

With agitated heart Queen Astarte did ask:
Will you, good woman, nurse my ailing prince?
With her lips the goddess touched the prince's forehead;
Fingers three she passed over the prince's heart:
Hail and sound was the boy,
His shining eyes beaming love and joy.
The goddess's heart went out to him:
I will make you immortal if I may.

In the quiet of the night Isis carried the sleeping child;
To the pillar enclosing the casket she took him.
A flaming fire she commanded to rise;
Within the flames she laid the sleeping child.
Round and round the pillar she in swallow-form flew,
Chanting: burn o holy fire all mortal parts away.

But Queen Astarte came seeking her child.
In alarm she shrieked
And all was mute.
No flames, no chant, no swallow.
The child lay breathing softly.
Now he will never immortal be.

The goddess revealed, one favour she asked.
Out of the pillar the casket was taken.
Together with the coffin of her beloved Isis embarked;
Sailed out of Byblos, across the sea, up the Nile.
Once did she open the coffin,
Embraced the sleeping god;

In tears and kisses she bathed him,
Then laid him down.

O merciless Seth!
He stole the body and in pieces he tore the god;
Over all the land Seth scattered the god.
Isis must now the quest renew.

Now Nephthys came to her aid.
Together, all over the land they searched.
Piece by piece they gathered the body of the god,
Till the god was whole once more.
Isis once more embraced Osiris
And in her womb Horus was formed.

The sacred funerary rites were all completed
For Ra decreed that Osiris with the gods shall dwell.

Isis paused. "To recount the battles of Horus and Seth would take too long. Two points, I think, may be observed in connection with these. First, the creator or creators of the myth, it seems to me, intended that there should be no finality here. The contention is strictly endless. Every victory for Seth is overturned by Horus. Every triumph for Horus is followed by a fresh onslaught by the forces of Seth. This is the first point. The second is that the detailed accounts of the battles have clearly grown over time; generation after generation added new episodes."

Isis was silent. Hypatia asked her, "Do you want to make any further comment?" "No, I don't feel I have anything worthwhile to add at the moment." "You have given an excellent recital, one that will help us explore the symbolic significance and the metaphysical dimensions of the myth."

"Who wants to contribute a thought?" Hypatia surveyed the class with her eyes. "Narmer," she said, looking at a lean boy with Nubian features, "you have something to say." "I think it is important to consider," Narmer said, "that to our ancestors the myth was not originally a myth, nor even a holy legend as our colleague Isis said it was to her grandfather. Probably it was originally a mystery fertility play, enacted ceremoniously, not perhaps as a magic rite to ensure the fertility of the land, but rather as a homage to the forces that give fertility and productivity to earth and animal and human being, and as a means of keeping alive the pious sense of indebtedness to Mother Earth and the active principles indwelling in soil and water and air."

Narmer stopped, then Apollonios said, “What Narmer says may well be true of the original birth of the myth. But I think that sooner or later the further development of the myth reflected, whether deliberately or without deliberation, the speculative views our ancestors began to form for themselves in responding to the riddles of life and death, generation and destruction, the orderly macrocosmos and the unruly microcosmos. The active principles indwelling in soil and water and air of which Narmer spoke may at first have been felt, experienced, as indwelling not merely in things but also within the human being. But in time these principles were not simply felt or experienced; they were thought; they were made into concepts and beliefs and theories. And here, as you, our beloved teacher, have always impressed on us, we encounter the glory and the peril of humanity. We can only be truly human by thought; but with thought come error and superstition and bigotry.”

Rameses said, “In an episode which Isis left out, when Ra lays a curse on Nut that she should not give birth in any month of the year, Thoth, the god of wisdom and learning, manages to beat Khonsu, the Moon-god, at a game, winning from him enough of his light to add five days to the days of the year. Those five days were not subject to the curse laid by Ra and so Nut was able to give birth to Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys. I mention this not to fill in a gap in our colleague’s narration; we know that the ramifications and variations of the myth are endless. I mention this to suggest that the myth in one aspect is a record of Egyptian history. The five days which Thoth, the god of wisdom and learning, added to the year, clearly refer to the establishment of the solar calendar of twelve thirty-day months plus the Epagomenal Days or ‘short month’ inserted between Mesore and the following Thuthi. We can also see in the myth a record of the deification of the kings of Egypt as sons of Ra or as reincarnations of Osiris.”

Other students took their turn in speaking, then Hypatia said, “Well, in my next lecture I will start attempting to do what I promised: to try to weave the myth with the thought of Plato, particularly with the *Parmenides*, and with the thought of Plotinus and see what insights that may lead us to.”

2.

Hotep waited by the gate to catch Isis on her way out. Their attachment is the talk of all the students. Isis came and they walked side by side. Both of them being by nature shy, there was usually little of flirtation in their conversation. They would discuss Hypatia's lectures, speak of their studies and their hopes for the future, exchange snippets about goings-on in her family or his, or walk silently side by side, happy just to sense their being close to each other.

But today Isis has something on her mind. While Hotep commented on Hypatia's lecture of that morning, Isis only put in a word here or there, clearly not willing to expand. At the first pause which could afford an opportunity for digression she said, "I see that lately you have been giving lots of attention to Sophia."

Hotep didn't expect that. "Oh, please, Isis, don't be silly. You know how much I love you. You know that no other girl in the world can be to me what you are to me."

"Don't tell me you talk with Sophia just as you do with anyone else of our colleagues. You seek her out and your conversations never seem to end. And, you know, she is rather pretty."

"You are silly, my dear Isis. You are completely mistaken. I have no interest in Sophia as a woman. But lately I have been interested in learning more about Christianity. I find much in Christian thought that is intriguing. Sophia has lent me some books and she explains to me about their beliefs and practices."

Isis was somewhat comforted by this explanation, but still she drove on. "Christian books are readily available everywhere. And you don't talk in the same way with Mariam. She is a Christian too."

"I have spoken with Mariam. But Mariam doesn't seem to take Christianity seriously. When I ask her about some point of Christian doctrine, instead of explaining to me what Christians believe she speaks of what she thinks. Interesting, but not what I am after."

Then, to tease Isis, he added with a grin, "If it were about looks, I find Mariam more attractive than Sophia." Isis could not help smiling.

For the moment Isis was satisfied. She knew that Hotep spoke honestly in saying that no other girl rivalled her in his heart. Little did she know that the

rival that was to smother their love was not to be Sophia or Mariam or any other woman, but the Church.

3.

“Let me venture on my treatment of the Isis and Osiris myth. But first let me say that the comments I have heard from you – and I mean every one of you who commented on the myth – have given me great pleasure and confirmed my pride in you. Your comments were perceptive and profound.” Hypatia spoke with a tremor of genuine emotion in her voice. She continued, “I will now try to allegorize certain elements of the Isis and Osiris myth after the manner of Philo’s allegorization of the myths of the Hebrew tradition. I know that our dear Hannah here has made a special study of Philo, so she will be able to judge if my allegorization bears comparison with Philo’s.”

Hannah acknowledged the gesture with a shy smile. Hannah and her brother Baruch were the two Jewish students in Hypatia’s philosophy class. They also attended her mathematics and astronomy classes.

“Primitive mythology is the primary endeavour of humans to infuse intelligibility into the primal chaos of phenomenal givenness. I will attempt to show not only that out of the womb of primitive mythology comes forth philosophical speculation, but also that in the end philosophy comes of age when it realizes that its highest reach is to embody its insights into reality in myths that claim no fixity or finality.”

For a moment Hypatia paused reflectively. There was a preliminary remark she had first to make. “In my metaphysical interpretation of the myth I will be having recourse to concepts and ideas which should be familiar to most of you from previous lectures. But still to others they may not be easily intelligible, especially as we have among us welcome visitors who do me honour by their presence. To them and to all of you I say, Bear with me. We will be returning again and again to the development and clarification of those concepts and ideas in future lectures.”

After another pause Hypatia continued, “Let us as a first step distribute the roles of the major personalities of the myth. Ra, although a sun-god, is not confined to that ‘natural’ role but is clearly seen as the chief god and as supreme god. In our allegorization we do not go far wrong if we take Ra to stand for Reality.

“Let us next take Nut, Ra’s consort, to represent bare Existence, equivalent to Plato’s Receptacle which he also designates the Womb. It is from the womb of Nut that Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys come into being.

Then I will take Osiris to stand for good and for creativity. Isis I will take initially to stand for wisdom, like the Greek Athena, the Roman Minerva, for we should never forget that these elemental traits of reality are necessarily sensed by the human soul everywhere and are embodied in various forms.

“For Seth I reserve a most important metaphysical role, for I take Seth to represent the principle of Negation, which is the root and indispensable condition of all finite existence. Seth is not evil but is the negation inherent in all particularity and his destructiveness is the Transience which is the father of Becoming. Seth is Death which is only the other face of regeneration and the birth of life. That is why in the myth Seth cyclically destroys Osiris to let him come into life anew. Perhaps it is not irrelevant to allude here to the cyclical argument in Plato’s *Phaedo*.

“For Nephthys too I have a fundamental metaphysical role, but at this stage I will simply characterize her as Thought, the ingenious, crafty power opposed to the ingenuous wisdom of Isis. Let me quickly complete the role distribution before going on to develop certain lines of my allegorical interpretation of the myth. Horus, the child of the love-embrace, is Becoming. Hapi, the Nile-god, is the stream of Time. The clever Thoth stands for science and learning. You will recall that Plato in the *Phaedrus* credits him with the invention of writing, and it does not escape Plato there to take him to task for thus seducing us into neglecting living discourse.”

4.

Artemis was walking leisurely with Philippos, her brother, around the School grounds, when Eucleides, seated under a tree, reading, saw them. He sprang up, walked briskly towards them, and called out, "Philippos!" The siblings slowed down their already easy pace until Eucleides caught up with them. The three walked together for a few minutes exchanging small talk. Philippos did not want to be in the way. He said, "I'll sit down here to read a little." He was happy that Artemis and Eucleides meant so much to each other. He could not think of a better match for his dear sister than his best friend.

Not that the lovers felt him to be in the way. In fact they flirted more openly when Philippos was around as if his presence prescribed a secure zone within which they could move freely. When the two were alone, Artemis was always somewhat more reticent, fearing the surge of her own emotions. So, when alone, they talked philosophy, or bickered about philosophical questions. Sometime Eucleides said to her teasingly, "You know I'm more at one with Philippos than with you. If he were your sister rather than your brother, I would have fallen in love with her." Artemis laughed. "Wrong," she said; "you are not like my brother — intellectually, I mean. Philippos is a genuine Epicurean. He values above all tranquility and peace of mind. He seeks serenity through freedom from worldly cares and illusory values. You are more in the way of Aristippus. You seek positive pleasure and think that life can offer a net surplus of pleasure over pain. This is an illusion."

When Philippos withdrew, leaving them alone, they walked for a while in silent contentment, relishing the warmth of their bodily proximity. Then Eucleides pulled the book Artemis held pressed to her breast. He looked at it then exclaimed in mock horror, "O Zeus Sôtêr! The *Enneads* again! Are you never fed up with Plotinus?" Artemis took the book out of his hand, saying, "Let me read you a passage that impressed me greatly. Come, let us sit down here."

Artemis read: "Bodies are by their bodies kept from union, but the bodiless are not held by this bodily limitation. What separates bodiless beings from one another is not spatial distance but their own differences and

diversities: when there is no difference between them, they are mutually present.”

Eucleides: “Beautiful. But you and I are not bodiless. Even in our spiritual aspect, even on the spiritual plane, being finite, distinct individuals, this constitutes a diversity that somehow conditions our being ‘mutually present’. You know that we hardly ever come to complete agreement in our philosophical discussions.”

Artemis: “Still, I appreciate your position and you appreciate mine. We enjoy our exchanges even when, or rather especially when they are ..” – her eyes flashed roguishly as she re-worded her sentence – “when you stubbornly refuse to admit the cogency of my reasoning; even then we feel that our exchanges are enriching.”

Eucleides: “Darling, you are evading the issue. You know what I had in mind. We are not bodiless. We need our bodily communion as much as our spiritual communion. Bodily union when inspired with love, with concern for the other, is spiritual.”

Artemis: “I agree with that in principle; you know it. But we are not alone in the world. We are part of society. We cannot go against social norms. To do that would be to err against the social order.”

Eucleides: “I don’t want us to go against social norms. I want us to marry and have children. But in the meantime ..”

They had had that discussion many times before and the issue remained hanging. Artemis gave him a warm, tender kiss on the cheek and said, “Let’s go. Hypatia will be heading to the lecture-hall any moment now.”

Eucleides let the palm of his hand rest on her cheek for a while before he heaved himself up and said, “Let’s go.”

5.

Having completed the initial distribution of roles among the characters of her divine drama, Hypatia was silent for a while, deep in thought, before resuming: "I said earlier that I take Isis to represent Wisdom. I also see her as the Principle of Integrity. Isis gathers the fragments of Osiris piece by piece. Only when the pieces coalesce to form a whole does Osiris live. A Platonist will read into this the idea of the one and the many: only the One, only the Whole, is real; the ultimate One, the ultimate Whole, is ultimate Reality, but even on a lower plane, only what is one and whole, in so far as one and whole, participates in reality; also, only what is one and whole, in so far as one and whole, is intelligible. This is the insight we find in Plato's words in the *Republic*: "He who sees things as a whole is philosophical, he who doesn't, isn't." Further, while the One can only exist in the many, the many have no reality without the One. You know that this is a view I have often put forward and it is one which I will take up again and again for development.

"Isis and Osiris are brother and sister, wife and husband. They each have a dual nature, divine and human. We see Isis transformed into an incorporeal form, we see her incarnated in a swallow, flying away in quest of Osiris, and again in the course of her flight descending to earth in human form. Throughout the myth we see both Isis and Osiris combining divine power with human frailty. Let me just remark in passing that the Christian doctrine of the dual nature of Christ is not a novelty, but a hoary tradition striking into the immemorable past. The kings of Egypt were divine and human and so were the heroes of the Hellenes, for they too were children of gods. Indeed there is hardly an ancient civilization in which the idea was not known. Again we may say that Isis and Osiris, at once sister and brother and wife and husband, represent the union of the divine and the ephemeral in all finite being, the duality of reality and existence in all actuality. I recall here the objections Parmenides brings forth in the *Parmenides* against separating the Forms from their sensible representations; but I must resist the lure of entering into that digression which would take us far away from our present object."

She shook her head, then returned to her main theme. “In my preliminary distribution of the roles, I skimmed hurriedly over the role of Nephthys, not out of disregard, but because I want to load her with much that might be thought somewhat far-fetched. Nephthys is the sister-consort of Seth, a member of the bad couple. She is ingenious and crafty. In the version of the myth given by our colleague Isis – which, I confess, was new to me –, Nephthys is the author of the chest stratagem. To me, Nephthys represents objective knowledge and determinate thought as opposed to the insight and inward light of the wisdom of Isis. Isis, who, like the person in Plato’s cave allegory who has seen the light of the sun and can no longer compete with the dwellers of the cave, finds herself helpless and calls on her sister for help. Nephthys, leaving her wicked husband Seth, joins her sister. Knowledge, objective knowledge, which is knowledge of the particular, has negation at its basis, since to know is to distinguish: what is *this* is, by definition, opposed to what is *not-this*; what is *such* is, by definition, opposed to what is *not-such*. Also, to know and therefore to distinguish, is to fragment the whole of immediate experience. But to understand is to rescue the wholeness of the fragmented whole. Hence Nephthys has to join Isis to regain the wholeness that is the condition of intelligibility.”

Hypatia paused for a while then spoke slowly as if intent to drive home every word of what she was to say. “I have once more to stress that in presenting these thoughts I do not in the least mean to suggest – and I don’t want anyone to imagine that I mean to suggest – that the creators of ancient myths had such thoughts in mind or meant to convey such ideas. My intention is to suggest that in the yearnings and tremors of our inner life, in our secret thirst for understanding, we seem to descry patterns and forms that bring the comforting gift of intelligibility. Humans shape those patterns and forms in various presentations. And never will any definite presentation be definitive — never will the travail of the creative spirit cease unless all living intelligence does cease. The maker of myths creates gods and the philosopher creates concepts. And the philosopher sees her or his concepts as original features of ultimate Reality, which cannot be exhausted in any definite formulation of thought. It is thus that philosophy, living philosophy, is an unquenchable thirst for understanding. It is in our constant thirst for understanding that we live intelligently. God forbid that that thirst should ever be finally satisfied!”

Hypatia slowly scanned her class with her eyes. The words she had just spoken bore the message she cared most to convey to her students. She continued: “In one version of the myth, one piece of Osiris could not be recovered by Isis. Let me construe this in terms of my philosophy as

follows: No actual whole can be complete; all actual, particular existents are imperfect, partial; even the cosmos as a whole is relative, for its actuality is essentially transient and can never hold eternity in its temporal frame; it can only share in eternity by ceaselessly transcending its temporality. Hence the vain dream of personal immortality is an illusion.”

6.

Seated on the steps leading to the lecture-hall, Mena and Zoser engaged in conversation.

Zoser said, “Our gods are worth as much as the material out of which we mould them. When human beings create their god out of their fear in facing the ferocious forces of nature, they have a frightful god; when they create their god out of their puzzlement before the mysteries of the world and the mysteries of life, they have an ingenious, all-knowing god; when out of gratitude for the good things they enjoy, they have a bountiful but possibly also capricious god. When we draw our idea of God from the fount of what we find best in us, then our god is an assurance that the ultimate origin of things must be an intelligent, loving, creative principle. This is the God that demands no worship, promises no reward, inflicts no punishment.”

Passing them on his way in, Hotep could not help overhearing a portion of their talk.

Zoser was saying, “God is my idea. I create God, and in creating God I become divine.”

Mena asked, “What if I create a God that is tyrannical, vengeful, wrathful, cruel?”

Zoser said, “It is out of the rottenness in me that I would create such a rotten God. By their gods you know them.”

Hotep never felt comfortable around those two. Neither of them showed any piety in speaking of the gods or God. He felt that their scepticism was not an intellectual stance, a mental tool for scrutinizing opinions, but the expression of a deep-rooted wickedness. He wondered that Hypatia seemed to pay them special attention as if she saw promise in them. In fact he has begun to feel – even though he would not admit it openly – that Hypatia’s thinking is .. well, not right. He stepped into the lecture-hall with a clouded spirit.

7.

Hypatia spoke, continuing her lecture: “We are further told that Isis made a likeness of the missing member by magic so that Osiris was complete. Again let me give my metaphysical construction, once more emphasizing that I do not pretend to disclose the original purpose or true meaning of the creator of the myth.

“Isis replaced the missing member with a likeness. The dissimulated member represents, in terms of my philosophy, the inescapable falsity, the inherent contradictoriness, in every determinate formulation of thought. This is the unquestioned postulate that, in Plato’s dialectic, must constantly be destroyed. And if we say that the missing member was the organ of procreation, then its unreality can stand as an allegory for the illusoriness, the insubstantiality, the ephemerality of all that becomes.

“Let me sum up my metaphysical reading into the myth as follows: Human life cannot rest on the power of Osiris alone. Seth has to destroy that power. The wisdom of Isis unaided cannot revitalize that power. Isis has to turn for succour to the unfathomed primal force of Nephthys to give substance to the ghostly form of the re-assembled Osiris. It is then that Horus is born — a living person, body and soul, child of eternity born into time, rooted in perfection but existing imperfectly. But also, human life cannot rest on the raw force of Nephthys alone. The unbound energy of Nephthys is the mindless Infinite, the Anaxagorean primal chaos, the boundless extension where all things were mixed together — the Indefinite of Plato’s *Philebus* which only becomes meaningful when ordered and ruled by the luminous forms of Osiris, given distinctness and specificity by the negativity of Seth. With Plato in the *Sophist* we find that it is necessary to bring in Not-being to affirm of anything that it is such, to set it as a definite, particular, finite thing, apart from all that is not such.”

Hypatia now returned to the slow emphatic cautionary diction she had used earlier. “I again emphasize – I think it necessary not to lose sight of this – that I have been reading my own philosophy, my version of Platonism, into the myth. It would be madness – or stupidity, which is far worse than madness – to claim that I have disclosed or have attempted to disclose the intention or the meaning behind the myth. This was the fault of the old allegorizers of Homer’s works, such as Diogenes of Apollonia and

Metrodorus of Lampascus in the golden age of Athens or, earlier still, Theagenes of Rhegium; this was the fault of Philo's allegorization of the Hebrew texts — if my dear Hannah will forgive me for saying this. The allegorizations of Philo were incorporated wholesale into the systems of early Christian thinkers such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen. In the Christian Gospels, Jesus invents parables and interprets them. This is different. Here the author of the parable intentionally constructs an allegory round an explicitly formed thought. This is like the moral behind an Aesop fable or like the intention behind Plato's allegory of the cave in the *Republic*. But in my reading of metaphysical meanings into the myth — as in the case of any permissible reading of meaning into a fixed text — I use the myth as an occasion for generating original thoughts out of my own mind, just as I might reflect on some event or some natural phenomenon and give birth to ideas that no one would claim were behind the event or the phenomenon that occasioned the reflection — or we may say, just as Socrates read his great idea of philosophical ignorance into the oracle received by Chaerephon. That is the meaning I find in Plato's insistence that no fixed text has the power to disclose the original intention of its author. The only intelligent use of the text is to make it an occasion for us to think for ourselves.”

8.

Sophia and Mariam were strolling towards the School. Hotep called from some distance behind them, "Sophia, Mariam!" They slowed down their pace; he quickened his steps and caught up with them.

As soon as he reached them he blurted out happily, "I have been admitted to the first sacrament. I am now a catechumen. How eager I am to be fully regenerated by baptism." Sophia nodded quietly. Mariam did not show any response.

Hotep was clearly dismayed; he said plaintively, "Aren't you going to congratulate me?" Sophia murmured something indistinctly. Mariam said, "You know I advised you not to rush. I call myself a Christian and attend church services now and then because I have no reason, yet, to ruffle the norm into which I was born and no wish to disturb my parents and relations and friends. But I cannot in clear conscience tell you that you have done well. Still, if, after consideration, you are convinced that what you are doing is the right thing to do, then of course you should do it. My best wishes for you."

The three walked on without another word till they reached the School grounds.

9.

Continuing a discussion started on their way out, Hotep, Mariam, and Sophia walked along with Hypatia on her way home. Hotep said, “According to the teaching of the Church, it was the woman that seduced man into disobedience and sin.”

Hypatia had to make an effort not to let her irritation colour her tone. “You do wrong to the very myth that you take to be of divine inspiration and that you claim to hold as literal truth — or rather, not you, but those who laid this perverted interpretation on the old myth, your revered Paul and your admired Augustine. Both men came into the new faith burdened with a sense of sin and guilt. Instead of preserving and spreading the sunny teaching of the Nazarene, as purportedly reported by some of his followers, they encumbered those good teachings with the garbage they brought along with them. Why, instead of taking the myth to mean that the woman seduced the man into disobedience and sin, don’t you rather say that the woman in the myth – Eve was her name, wasn’t it? – led the man and led all humans to ‘open their eyes’, not to their pudenda as your silly story goes, but to knowledge, open their minds to understanding, and to proclaim their freedom and their right to decide for themselves and not to submit blindly to any authority? The snake in that myth would on this interpretation be the unease at the unknown, the malaise we experience when we become aware of our ignorance — that fertile malaise which breeds the urge to know and to understand.”

Hypatia paused for a while, looking at her hearers to see what effect her words had on them. Mariam looked with shining eyes, clearly enchanted by this fresh reading of what had till then been to her a puerile tale. But Hotep was glum. He was unhappy at this distortion of beliefs he has come to find rest in.

Hypatia continued, “You see how this illustrates what I have always tried to emphasize, what Plato has been so keen to emphasize. With ancient myths, as with any fixed text, it is arrogant and foolish to say that the original author meant this or that. Since we cannot question the author, be it man or woman or god, we have no right to say that she or he meant this or that.”

They arrived at Hypatia's mansion and Hypatia stopped, expecting them to say goodbye. But they were reluctant to go; they wanted to hear more. Hypatia said, "Will you come in?" They gladly accepted the invitation. They entered the simple parlour, familiar to them from many earlier visits. Mariam sat in her accustomed seat next to a bust of Socrates on a stand.

Hypatia resumed, "I will give you another example to illustrate how a fixed text can be said to have no meaning in itself. The context may limit somewhat the practically endless possible interpretations of the text. But what is essential in the meaning we read into any text comes from the store of ideas in the mind of the hearer or reader. I will give you the example I have in mind. I have read somewhere in your Christian literature an enigmatic but rich saying. It goes something like this: 'He who has shall be given ..'".

Sophia recited, "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."

Hypatia continued, "Yes. Now I find in this profound meaning, one can almost say a principle of metaphysical status. The ampler and richer a mind is, the more that mind will read into a text or a situation. You may read a good book when young and with a limited scope of knowledge. And you may enjoy the book and feel with justice that you have understood it. Then ten years or so later on, or perhaps much later on, you reread the book and discover new meanings in it and wonder to yourself, 'How did I deceive myself into thinking that I understood this book when I read it the first time? Indeed, how could I have understood it then?' Your more highly sophisticated mind will have read into the book meanings that may be closer to what the author had had in mind, or may not be so. Of that you can never be sure."

Hypatia looked into the faces of her hearers. Again, Mariam looked eager and exuberant as she imbibed the words of her teacher, but Hotep looked a little uneasy, perplexed perhaps. Hypatia sensed that; she continued, "This is what I read into the saying. I have heard from one of your fellow Christians a different interpretation. Perhaps you, Hotep, can give that approved Church interpretation better than I can."

Hotep obliged, "Gladly. The interpretation I heard from one of our teachers is that he who has faith in Christ is given grace and everlasting life. He who does not have faith in Christ has no share in that."

Hypatia wanted her comment to be as little offending as possible. "Now that is as possible an interpretation as any other. But, for myself, I find it unnecessarily restrictive. I could also say that I do not feel happy with it in

other respects, but that would take us out of the context of our present discussion.”

The Church, she felt, was a bad influence. In the good old days the Egyptian gods and the Greek gods lived peacefully side by side. The pious of all faiths realized that they were fumbling, reaching out for something common to all but known to none. It was the Hebrew notion of their jealous god that would not have them honour any other god, inherited by the Christians, that bred discord. Now the Christians are not only sworn enemies to all other religions but are engaged in bitter in-fighting, ready to kill a fellow-Christian literally for an iota.

How sad it is, Hypatia sourly mused, that Alexandria, which for long was an intellectual and spiritual lighthouse outshining her great marine lighthouse, has been deteriorating in every respect. Ever since the shameful and ominous pillage of the great Library perpetrated twenty-six years ealier under Bishop Theophilus – the Library which was the pride not only of Alexandria, not only of Egypt, but of the whole civilized world – ever since then, our society, our people have been sinking deeper and deeper into the mire of ignorance, fanaticism, and superstition.

But Hypatia had no desire to embitter the temper of the present conversation. After all, of her present company, Mariam was too good a philosopher to succumb to fanaticism or dogmatism and Sophia, by nature gentle and kind, was a model of what is best in Christianity or any other faith. It was Hotep that gave her some cause for concern; but still she hoped that the enthusiasm of the new convert would in time be tempered by reason. So she took the discussion back to the subject of Plato’s distrust of fixed texts, which was a favourite theme with her. They conversed until her guests, feeling they had overtasked the kindness of their gracious teacher, took their leave.

10.

In the lecture-hall, Hypatia spoke. “I will now try to develop my metaphysical interpretation of the myth by developing the roles I have assigned to each of the characters. I will begin with Ra. And at the start I have to admit that in Ra I have put too much of my own thought, much more so than with the other characters. Perhaps excusably. At any rate, I crave your indulgence in this instance and promise you that as we move forward you will find my allegorization more palatable.

“So, we take Ra for Reality. We then ask, What is Reality? As far as we can tell, Socrates was not concerned with the problem of metaphysical reality, and yet it was he who first led us to the only metaphysically viable reality.

“Philosophy came of age with Socrates’ conception of the intelligible as the realm of reality. All earlier philosophers had thought of the real as an objective something. Heraclitus’ Fire was an objective thing and his Logos was a principle inspiring all reality but it was not itself clearly conceived as the Real, although, in justice to Heraclitus, we must say that he seems to have been moving in that direction. Parmenides equated ‘to be’ with ‘to be thought’ but still imagined the One as something objective. Anaxagoras acknowledged the logical priority of *nous* to the cosmic process, but still reality remained for him the objectively ordered cosmos. Socrates, as understood and represented by Plato, saw the intelligible as the real and as the whole of reality, all else derives what reality it has by dependence on the intelligible. Reality is not what we see and touch and count and measure: these are the outward display of the real; the real is the creative intelligence that generates and sustains the objective. This is the central principle of my Platonism: our inner reality is the whole of reality. Thus I may say: I am God — not I, Hypatia, speaking to you here and now, but the I that is in all of us. Everything outside the I is mutable and evanescent and all specific manifestation of the I, all definite, particular expression or affirmation of the I, is transient. Only the creativity of the ultimate I is transcendent and supra-temporal.

“But Ra without Nut is barren. The One of Parmenides cannot engender actual existents. The Aristotelean Being is sterile. For Reality to support and sustain actual existence, which in itself is riddled with not-being, Reality

must be multi-dimensional and must be creative. Becoming remains unintelligible until we conceive of ultimate Reality as not simple but as having more than one dimension. And when we try to find a law or formula that governs all becoming, we find that, though we can find formulations that lend intelligibility to becoming, all such formulations are at bottom of the selfsame nature as naïve primitive myths, and that underlying all these formulations we have only the basic insight that Reality is ultimately creative, that creativity is an ultimate feature, principle, or dimension of Reality. This is what I call the Principle of Creativity.

“Hence I conceive ultimate Reality as Creative Eternity, its creativity being Creative Intelligence, perpetually creating intelligibles that perpetually evanesce into new intelligibles, like the constantly changing colours of the clouds reflecting the rays of the setting sun, or the notes of a melody, each note having no being but in passing into the next note, each moment of objective existence only has life as it dies in giving birth to the next. This is what I call the Principle of Transience. All finite, particular actuality is transient, and only finite, particular actuality exists: thus all existence is transient and only the transient has actuality. Creative reality is transcendent and supra-temporal.

“Ultimately, there is nothing we can explain. Everything remains a mystery. But we may reach a number of first principles — call them ultimate moments of reality if you will. Of these I affirm the following: the mystery of being is ultimate; the reality of intelligence is ultimate and irreducible: in vain do we seek to see mind or understand mind in terms of objective givenness; the principle of creativity is ultimate; the principle of transience is ultimate, proclaiming that all definite, particular actuality and all determinate thought is evanescent, fugitive, having no being but in the transcendent reality of creative intelligence. That is why I oppose the existence of all actuality to intelligible reality, or perhaps it is better to say, to the reality of creative intelligence. To let the transcendence of reality stand out in relief, I name ultimate Reality: Creative Eternity.”

Hypatia paused. When she spoke a note of sadness pervaded her tone:

“Before I wind up today’s lecture, let me put in a word of caution, although it may not seem to be pressingly needed in this class, yet it is good to have it always present in our minds. However rich in meaningful symbolism a myth may be, to appreciate its symbolic meaningfulness is one thing, and to believe in the literal truth of the symbols is quite another thing. Our ancestors, Egyptians and Hellenes, even the simple, common folk among them, may not have questioned the veracity of their myths, but neither did they hold to them with fanatic literalism. They easily and readily

accepted variations and alternative versions because they sensibly felt that what was important was the vague, the nebulous, meaning behind the symbols; what was of value to them was the lived experience that the tale kindled in them. That is why a Hellene could pay homage to an Egyptian god or goddess without any sense of having betrayed her or his indigenous religion. You know that the Temple of Serapis welcomed worshippers of all sects. Homage was paid equally to Osiris, Zeus, Pluto, Apis. There was no discord among the worshippers. The Hebrews first brought to us the disease of a fixed creed to be accepted whole and entire as unquestionable and absolute truth. And now the Christians have taken this to new heights of irrationality. Not only do they expect their fundamental myths to be accepted literally, but they are daily proliferating new superstitious puzzlements over which they fight and kill.”

Hypatia spoke with more heat than usual. She was not thinking of the Christian students in her class. The sceptical Mariam and the matter-of-fact Christian Sophia were each in her own way free of fanaticism. Not so Hotep who had the fire of the convert. Had Hypatia looked in his direction while she was speaking she would have seen that he was clearly uneasy. But Hypatia was not thinking of Hotep either. The unaccustomed vehemence of her speech was due to the confluence of two turbulent streams. In her daily goings and comings, in the normal give and take of quotidian life, she was increasingly conscious of a growing dogmatic rigidity, a deadly conformity, a slavish submission to authority, spreading in society. Then, and surely this was responsible in a higher degree for her vexation, the recent conversion of Hotep stirred in her the old pain of a former conversion that was closer home to her.

11.

“Whenever I attend a church meeting I find them harping on sin,” Sophia was complaining to Mariam as they strolled under the mild winter sun. Rameses had just passed them by when his ear caught the words. He turned back.

“You Christians are obsessed with the notion of sin and the sinfulness of the body.”

Mariam: “What the Gospels say of Jesus in this regard is not quite consistent. While there is much in the canonical Gospels that suggests Jesus did not see the body as something corrupt and polluted, as when he made little of ablutions and purifications, and as when he said, ‘not what goes into the mouth defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a person’, yet on the other hand he is made to say, ‘But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.’

Rameses: “Suppose I am conversing with this or that girl of our colleagues, what evil is there if, while speaking with her I am moved to desire her?”

Sophia: “Desire?”

Rameses: “Yes, I do mean to desire her erotically. That is a natural feeling that arises naturally: I respond naturally to her beauty and her natural charm.”

Sophia: “Even if the desire in itself is not sinful, still it can lead to evil.”

Rameses: “Let us see. Having felt that desire in myself, there are several avenues open to me. I may realize that there are insurmountable obstacles to the fulfilment of that desire. I am content with the pleasurable exhilaration of the momentary sensation and let the thing end there. Nobody is injured and no wrong is done.”

Sophia: “I am not so sure about that. Still, there are other possibilities.”

Rameses: “Yes. I may think it likely that she might respond positively to my desire and go on to intimate my desire to her by some word, gesture, or motion. If it turns out that I was mistaken and she rebuffs my advances, then possibly the only injury would be the wound to my pride.”

Mariam: “What of the wound to her feelings?”

Rameses: “That is certainly something I should have considered and I can certainly be blamed for not being thoughtful enough. Let me go on to the remaining possibility. The girl may go along with my desire. Then various consequences, some good and some bad, may follow. The two of us may be rightly chastised for being foolish. But in the desire in itself, and in giving way to the desire as such, there is no pollution, no sin, no evil.”

Sophia: “So you believe no evil can possibly attach to such a situation?”

Rameses: “You’re picturing me as an absurd monster, or as a monstrous absurdity rather. The gravest danger and most pernicious evil lurks in all dealings between humans, not only between man and woman but in all dealings of one human with another human. But let me stick to our hypothetical situation. The only wrong that injures the soul and would therefore be morally wrong and morally evil is, if at any moment, in any word or deed, by any word or deed, I ignore or violate the girl’s will, the integrity and autonomy of her personality, if I use her as a thing and not commune with her as a person. If I slight her feelings, if I disregard her good, if I cause her pain, then I forfeit my humanity. But my desire in itself and by itself is blameless. And if two persons join in love, then he sins against life who sees sin in that. There may of course be regrettable consequences to any human relationship, but that is a different question, and should not be allowed to confuse the issue here.”

12.

Hypatia was on her way out of the School grounds. Hotep was passing by. He murmured a courteous greeting and was about to move on. Hypatia said, "Wait. Let's walk together." He seemed to hesitate. She said, "I'll not take you out of your way. I'll not be heading towards home. I just want to walk about for a while."

As if to anticipate an expected assault, Hotep said abruptly, "I know you are not happy about my conversion to Christianity."

Hypatia: "You know my position."

Hotep: "You do not seem to find anything wrong with Mariam being a Christian. Why are you so upset about my becoming a Christian?"

Hypatia: "Mariam did not choose to become a Christian; she was born to Christian parents, and she keeps an open mind, seeking understanding wherever she may find it. You are heir to two rich cultures, the Egyptian and the Hellenic, and beyond that to the earnest endeavours of humans everywhere to come to terms with the riddles of being and of life, and you are willing to trade all that for a narrow dogmatic faith. Surely your respect for your own intelligence should move you to stop and think."

Hotep: "Why don't you regard the Christian doctrine in its turn as a worthy contribution to human culture?"

Hypatia: "I am quite willing to do that. You know that I have in many of my lectures cited favourably various parts of Christian literature. You know that I admire the moral teaching attributed in some books to the originator of the Christian movement and find them in full harmony with the moral outlook of Socrates."

Hotep: "What is it then that you find wrong with Christianity?"

Hypatia: "Much, and frankly .. I do not want to offend you or to cause you pain, but .. frankly, I am dismayed by your inability to see what is wrong."

She paused. She was sad. Almost in a swoon, she re-lived a wrecking experience, twenty years back. For a moment she was not in the here and now; she was living then and there. For a moment, Hotep by her side was not Hotep but that one. A sickening mixture of gloom and perplexity grabbed her. How could an intelligent young man, of whom she had expected so much, so simply give up his right to think, to question, to be master of his own mind? Is this the person she had at one time loved?, the

man she had sometime been united with? A union which at the time she felt to be pure and holy because it was a physical union, a spiritual union, a metaphysical union, all in one. How could he refer to that act of life-affirmation as a sin? Surely the thought-mould that turns love into sin is corrupt and vicious.

She shook her head violently to come back to where she physically was. They had come to where the Caesareum-turned-church stood. She felt him slowing his steps. She saw him turning his head towards the church entrance. "Go in, go in," she said. Without a word he disappeared within.

13.

Before leaving the lecture-hall, Isis was exuberant, as she always was after hearing Hypatia speak. But when she stepped out, a heaviness crept on her heart. Reluctantly, she headed for ‘their’ habitual seat under the haughty cypress tree. Hotep saw her ahead of him, and more by force of habit than by inclination he quickened his steps to catch up with her. He reached her and walked silently by her. He was evidently gloomy and she felt the heaviness weighing on her heart press harder. They reached ‘their’ seat and sat down. For a couple of minutes they stared blankly ahead. Then Isis, without any preliminaries, spoke as if resuming a discussion that had just been interrupted.

Isis: “Does the postulation of a pre-existent creator do away with the riddle of being? Does it not simply shift the problem one stage further. My five-year old sister when told that God made the world immediately asks, Who made God? She is a better philosopher than all your theologians put together. The mystery of being is an ultimate mystery that will never go away. It stares us in the face as soon as we are aware of our own being — in other words, as soon as we emerge as intelligent beings. The birth of the human being is the birth of the philosopher that is struck with wonder.”

Hotep: “I appreciate that. I very much like the way you expound the ultimate mystery of being. No wonder Hypatia takes special pride in you. But still I think that the order of the cosmos points to an intelligent designer.”

Isis: “Why can’t that intelligence be intelligence inherent in primal reality? After all, the best intelligence we know is not the craftsman’s that works on things outside the craftsman and produces things separate from the producer. The purest intelligence we know is that of the poet, the philosopher, the mathematician, in which the mind by itself, in itself, of itself, issues forth creatively, living its own reality in its own creative activity.”

Hotep: “My dear Isis, I don’t know whether I love you more, admire you more, or fear you more when you go into these Platonic flights of thought. To be honest, my uppermost feeling is one of dread. You make me dizzy and you make me fearful of losing the assurance I have lately found in my new faith.”

Isis: “Hotep, dare to think, dare to be your own creature, your own creator. That is the only way to preserve your human dignity, to have your true worth as a human being.”

Hotep: “No, Isis, no. This is to fall into the sin of pride, to refuse the guidance of Heaven, putting reliance on our weak, sinful human nature.”

Isis knew she had lost him. This was not the Hotep she once loved. Was that other Hotep a creature of her own imagination, her own desire? Her burgeoning femininity craved love and her imagination endowed him with the qualities she would love. When she spoke next she was not addressing the same person as before. She half-hated herself because she felt she was not speaking with warmth. She was not trying to communicate with his soul. She was simply concerned to rebut a theoretical position she found faulty. Even her tone was different.

Isis: “Let us assume that the existence of the world, that the order in the existing world, proves the existence of a creator.”

Hotep: “That’s how I see it.”

Isis: “Well, what does that prove? That the creator is powerful and ingenious.”

Hotep: “We also know that he is good.”

Isis: “How do we know that?”

Hotep: “By all the good things he has provided for us.”

Isis: “What about all the evil? All the calamities, disasters, and catastrophes? All the disease and misery and pain?”

Hotep: “We cannot compass the wisdom of God. He must have a purpose in permitting these things to happen. And most of the misery of human beings is brought about by our own evil deeds.”

Isis: “I could easily turn all of that against the position you’re defending. But I will not dispute that now. I will allow you your personal creator, separate from the world, all-wise, all-powerful, all-good — we’ll forgive him all the evil and the misery in the world.”

Isis saw that Hotep was pained at the sardonic impiety of these words and felt sorry. She had no desire to hurt his feelings. Before he could object she said: “I’m sorry. Forget that I said that.”

Hotep did not respond. Isis continued, “All right, given the existence of God, why could he not be our benign Ra, or even the whimsical Zeus? Or Ormazd who has the advantage of being free of blame for evil, all evil being the work of Ahriman?”

Hotep: “I am convinced that the scriptures sanctioned by the Church reveal to us the true God.”

Isis: “On what ground, Hotep?”

Hotep hesitated. He knew that the answer which to him was satisfactory, to her was absurd. But he had no other answer. So, hesitantly the words came out of his lips: "It is the word of God."

Isis: "Dear Hotep, surely you know how ridiculous this answer is. The holy book must be believed because it is the word of God. Who says it is the word of God? The holy book says it is the word of God."

"The Church says it is the word of God." Hotep said emphatically.

"And who", retorted Isis, "invested the Church with the authority to say that? Don't you see we're going round and round in circles?"

Again Hotep hesitated. He said slowly, "One must have faith."

Isis: "All right, you believe your scriptures reveal God to you. What kind of god? A god that wilfully creates the evil Satan? A god that is wrathful and vengeful? A god that favours one particular nation for whose sake he inflicts unspeakable torments on the innocent people of Egypt when, with his boundless power, he could have taken his favourites away without hurting anyone? Even if you could give me indubitable proof of the existence and power of such a god, I would freely choose to fry for ever in his everlasting hell rather than show him any regard."

Isis spoke vehemently and Hotep was shocked. Surely it was not her mind but her heathen spirit – the devil working on her unholy heathen spirit – that drove her to such heated opposition to the call of faith.

Again Isis sensed his disconcertment and again regretted her uncontrolled outburst.

Isis: "Look, Hotep, I apologize. I do not want to offend you. It seems we have reached irreconcilable positions and such arguments will not take us anywhere. But I cannot give up the hope that you may reconsider your position calmly. You know that Mariam is arranging a forum on Christianity. Maybe that will afford an opportunity for quiet reflection."

Hotep: "Mariam has spoken to me about her idea. I don't think any good can come out of it. Mariam is only Christian in name. She is opposed to the authority of the Church. Even Sophia is unreliable; she is too tepid. All the others are heathen — begging your pardon."

Isis: "Don't you think that rather makes for a reasoned objective discussion?"

Hotep: "No. Faith must come first."

Isis could not suppress her sarcastic note. "That is, you must make up your mind to believe before you consider your grounds for believing."

In the old days their long-drawn conversations, part philosophic, part personal, part idle prattle, would end with, "Well, it's time to go," and that would mean that he would walk her to her residence, say goodbye, and then

retrace his steps to his own residence which they would have bypassed on the way to hers. But not this afternoon. No. It was all over. "Excuse me," he said; "I have somewhere to go." He got up and walked away. Isis tarried. She knew they would both be going the same way and she waited to allow time to make sure they would go the same way separately.

14.

Students were strolling round the grounds, some in duettos or trios, conversing; some solo, meditating. But Mariam, walking alone, was not in meditative mood; she had something on her mind; she was looking for someone in particular.

She saw Baruch and went straight to him. “Where is your sister? Why is she not with you?” “Hannah could not come today. She is a little indisposed.” “I’m sorry. Convey to her my best wishes.”

Mariam continued, “Baruch, I’ve been thinking of something and want to ask for your collaboration. I know that you, like all of our colleagues, have been following the never-ending theological controversies raging among Christians. I think that this madness has gone too far.”

Baruch was not surprised at Mariam’s language. Mariam’s rebellion and ‘heresy’ were matter of common knowledge.

She continued, “The Church is fettering the minds of its followers with its absurd superstitions. You know that, outside the School, I cannot have an intelligent conversation with anyone in our community. If that were all, bad as that is, the evil would have been limited. But the increasing cloistering of the Christians is dividing our society as it has never been divided before. We are no longer one people. We are separate clans regarding each other with mutual suspicion and mutual hatred.”

Baruch said sadly, “What do you want me to do, Mariam?”

Mariam: “Oh, don’t be frightened! I am not asking you to go out to lead a revolution. We have enough of violence and bloodshed in the repeated clashes between your Jewish crowds and our Christian crowds. You and I are not going to join the mindless rabble.”

“What is your idea, then?”, Baruch said thoughtfully.

“I thought that we, as students of philosophy, should try to be clear in our minds about what I call this Christian phenomenon. I know that Sophia and I are the only Christians in Hypatia’s class — were the only Christians, until Hotep converted. But what is happening should be of concern to all of us. Christianity is not only growing in numbers but is building up a formidable fortress of dogmatic thought, now armed with institutional authority, which threatens to throttle all free inquiry and dry up the founts of understanding.”

Baruch could not help smiling appreciatively at Mariam's rhetorical flourish.

Baruch: "Well, I still don't see what you want us to do."

Mariam smiled in her turn. "After all the drum-beating and trumpeting I have been parading, I'm afraid my proposal will come as a flat bathos. I mean to arrange a forum for discussing the question how the daunting edifice of the Church has grown out of the teaching of the meek, peace-loving Jewish reformer who lived some four centuries ago."

Baruch: "Why are you asking for my collaboration?"

Mariam: "I'm not asking you alone. I intend to ask Eucleides, Philippos, Artemis, Isis, Rameses, Narmer, and others. But I thought that you and Hannah with your Hebrew learning are especially equipped to throw light on the origins of the Christian movement."

Baruch: "Well, I think it's a good idea. Whatever may come out of it, a student of philosophy cannot abstain from a discussion about the birth and development of ideas. Count me in."

Mariam: "Good. I'll let you know when the tryst is fixed. And I want Hannah also to participate."

Alas! Mariam didn't know that events were moving too fast for her proposed forum to see the light.

15.

Lately Hotep had been avoiding Isis. She knew it and was careful not to embarrass him by being in his way. So when he hesitantly walked towards where she sat alone reading in a quiet spot of the School garden, she was more puzzled than surprised.

“May I sit down here?”, he said. She nodded.

He sat down and for a long while was silent, staring in front of him, not looking at her. Then he spoke, as if to himself and as if repeating something he had long rehearsed.

Hotep: “Plotinus truly says, ‘Life here below in the midst of sense objects is for the soul a degradation, an exile, a loss of wings’.”

Isis: “I believe that in saying this Plotinus corrupts the poetry of Plato. Plato’s concern, as I see it, was that the body and the bodily should not be a distraction from and a hindrance to the unfoldment of our spiritual possibilities. Plato was too much of a Greek and too much of a disciple of Socrates to lose himself in a haze of other-worldliness. Plato’s spirituality is a spirituality we rise up to as embodied human beings. In the *Symposium* the ascent is through love and adoration of embodied beauty; even when, in its highest reaches, it is embodied in laws and mathemata, it is still embodied beauty. In the *Republic* the journey to the Form of the Good is through *phronêsis*, through dialectical thinking, which leads to understanding – to the vision of the Good discovered within us. This is spirituality ‘here below’.”

Hotep was dismayed at the vehemence of her tone. It was evident to both of them that their differences were no longer theoretical. Both sensed that they had drifted apart. In fact Hotep no longer felt he was attached to Isis in the old way, or if he felt it, he tried to suppress that feeling as something unclean. His duty was now to save her soul – and perhaps even that not out of concern for her but to atone for his earlier sinful attachment to her. He had hoped that his appeal to Plotinus would help him steer her to his new faith. Since that ploy failed, he would now go for a more direct assault.

“Isis,” he said, “if you only listen to me — if you will only go with me to one of the meetings in the church – give the Christian doctrine serious consideration – after all, don’t we say, as students of philosophy, that we should weigh all points of view without prejudice?”

Isis tried to answer calmly. “I am not ignorant of Christianity. You know that I have read much of Christian literature. I have found much that is good in it and much that is not so good. But to accept the whole system as a rounded creed, on authority, that I see as an affront to reason.”

Hotep: “Isis, you have read some of the literature – but to hear the word from those who have found new life in it – open your heart to it ..”

Isis interrupted: “Open my heart to it! That is, to put my mind to sleep! No, I cannot separate my heart and my mind. I am one person, mind and feeling and body, all one.”

Hotep: “You accept the philosophy of Plato as expounded by Hypatia.”

Isis, with an effort tempering her vehemence, tried to speak more calmly.

“We, together with Hypatia, regard Plato as the greatest philosopher ever. We find inspiration in him and in his works we find valuable insight. But we criticize his thought. We uncover defects in his arguments and find fault with his conclusions. And we believe that that is what Plato meant his students to do. He does not ask us to take anything on trust or in deference to authority. That is why, with whatever enthusiasm we may embrace Platonism, we still keep our freedom and our dignity. To submit to unquestioned and unquestionable authority – be it the authority of a text or of a person – is to forfeit our right to think, to understand, and that is to undermine our human dignity. That is what you are urging me to do.”

Isis was again speaking heatedly and Hotep knew he had no way with her.

“I am sorry for you,” he said; “I wanted to lead you to salvation.”

Isis knew that he was lost to her just as he knew that she was lost to him. She got up and walked away, her anger lending her steps vigour. He heaved himself up and plodded heavily in a different direction.

16.

Hypatia was bringing her morning lecture to a close. “When the casket devised by Nephthys enclosed Osiris in a perfect fit, that spelled his doom. When the casket of determinate thought envelops the meaning in a perfect fit, that is the grip of death. That is the core of the wisdom in Plato’s warning against encrusting living thought in any fixed formula of words. A finite intelligence can only have a hemmed and conditioned expression of truth. Otherwise it would not relate to the essentially hemmed and conditioned existents in the actual world. The chimera of absolute, definitive truth is a Gorgon’s head that petrifies the mind. All knowledge is relative and conditioned. Only when seen in perspective does it yield understanding. Only when its postulates are constantly questioned and destroyed does the mind holding it remain alive and free. That is why all unchallenged authority, human or purportedly divine, is death to the mind, and is the negation of human dignity.”

At these words of Hypatia’s, Isis glanced at Hotep who was seated not far from her. And it was at this point that he realized that their ways parted for good. His indecision about transferring from the pagan school to the Catechetical School could not be prolonged any further. This must be his last day in this unwholesome atmosphere. Tomorrow morning he must apply to enroll in the Christian school. They were sure to welcome him with open arms.

On leaving he sought Mariam and Sophia. He was glad Isis was not in the way. When Mariam said she wanted to ask Hypatia about a point in the lecture they had just heard, Hotep said imploringly, “Please, I have to talk to you, to the two of you.”

The three walked out together, taking their way to Rhacotis where both Mariam’s and Sophia’s houses were situated at a short distance from each other in a street inhabited mostly by Christians.

Hotep did not lose time. “I have finally decided to apply for enrolment at the Catechetical School. I believe you should do the same. Hypatia’s teaching is clearly incompatible with the teaching of the Church.”

Mariam retorted sharply. There was anger mixed with incredulity in her tone. “Oh, Hotep, I can’t believe you are saying this! Is this the philosophy

we have always bragged we were devoted to? For myself I will never exchange Hypatia for any other teacher in the world.”

Hotep turned to Sophia. Sophia said she could not see any harm in attending Hypatia’s lectures while submitting to the Church in religious matters. Hotep urged that she should at least consult her parents. Sophia did not think her parents would like her to disrupt her studies in this way.

Hotep was grieved. “I am sorry for both of you,” he said bitterly, “especially for you, Mariam. The evil influence of all those heathens has gone far with you. Not only Hypatia; you listen too much to Isis.”

Mariam was indignant. She spoke wryly. “Isn’t Isis the one you were so mad about?”

“I loved her,” Hotep said, “until she stubbornly refused to accept Christ. I wanted to save her soul because I loved her.”

His voice broke. He was too agitated to continue. And he knew that he could not make headway with Mariam and Sophia any more than he had succeeded with Isis.

He fell back as Mariam and Sophia walked ahead. Turning back, they waved goodbye and walked on. He did not even return their goodbye gesture.

17.

Amasis was standing surrounded by a number of colleagues outside the lecture hall. He saw Hypatia coming. Leaving his friends he advanced towards her. She strode to meet him. "Welcome back, Amasis," she said, placing her hand on his shoulder. "I am so sorry about your dear mother."

Amasis had been away at his home-town Akhmim, which the Hellenes named Panopolis. He had been called to see his sick mother. He arrived just in time to receive her blessing and see her breathe her last. The family members said her *ka* had been hanging, refusing to depart before she saw her darling baby, now eighteen. At Hypatia's words a tear rolled down his cheek. Hypatia patted his shoulder gently then headed for the lecture hall.

During her lecture Hypatia saw that Hotep was not there. Afterwards, on the way out she stopped Isis. "Isis, do you know why Hotep has not shown up today?" Isis was evidently agitated; she could hardly bring out the words. "I have no idea. The last time we were together, a couple of days ago, we parted after an angry altercation." Mariam who was within earshot came forward. "Hotep will no longer come here. He has applied for enrolment at the Catechetical School."

This was no surprise to any of them, but Isis felt herself choked with stifled tears. She lowered her head and turned to go. Hypatia put her arm around the girl's shoulder. Isis sobbed. Mariam held her hand and said, "I am sorry, Isis. I am really sorry." Then she stepped aside. It was best to leave her to the tender care of Hypatia.

Hypatia led the girl to her office. On the way she did not speak. She merely muttered soothing sounds. Her own spirit was heavy. Her mind far away, far back in time.

18.

Early in the morning Sophia was ready for going out to school. She said goodbye to her mother, kissed her little brother still sleeping in his bed, and left. She walked the short distance up to the next corner and stood there waiting for Mariam to join her. They always took the long walk from Rhacotis to the School in the Brucheum together.

It was not long before Mariam appeared coming towards her. Even at a distance Sophia sensed there was something amiss. As soon as Mariam was close enough Sophia asked her anxiously, "What is it, Mariam? You are not your usual sweet self. What's wrong?"

Mariam: "Last night I had a row with Stephanus."

Sophia: "Your betrothed? He always seemed to me so kind and gentle."

Mariam: "It has nothing to do with his character. He complains that I am neglecting my spiritual duties. I have not been going to church regularly and .. you know it all."

Sophia: "That is no reason to fight with your betrothed. If going to church more regularly will restore peace between you, do it for his sake and your sake."

Mariam: "It isn't that simple, Sophie. He knows what's behind my neglect. He is not happy about the turn of my thinking and he complains that Hypatia's teaching is corrupting me. I have no problem with going to church now and then or even regularly but I will not let him take that as a sign that I was changing my thinking. That would be deception."

Sophia: "Oh, Mariam, if he loves you and you love him, as I am sure you do, you will in time accept each other as you are."

Mariam: "No, Sophie, I don't think that is possible and I don't think it would be right. His religion means too much to him and freedom of thought means too much for me."

Sophia did not know what to say. She knew Mariam was in earnest in saying what she said and she knew that Mariam was too intelligent to be appeased by empty words.

Mariam came to the rescue. She said, "Let's talk about something else."

Two days later, when they met in the morning, Mariam said in a matter-of-fact tone, "It's over."

Sophia looked at her inquiringly.

Mariam added, “Stephanus went to my father’s shop yesterday and announced to him formally that he considered our engagement broken. He said, ‘I cannot bind myself to one who has sold her soul to the devil’.”

Sophia felt the anger and pain in Mariam’s voice. Her own voice quivered as she said, “That was very cruel of him to say to your father. It must have caused Uncle unspeakable pain.”

Mariam said quietly, “I am glad that troubled relationship has come to its logical conclusion. I am only sorry for the pain it has caused my dear mother and father.”

Later at the School, Mariam told the news to Hypatia. She repeated Stephanus’s words about refusing to be bound to someone who has sold her soul to the devil. The words sank a dagger in Hypatia’s heart. With an effort she tried not to let her voice betray her. Gently stroking Mariam’s cheek she said, “It’s all for the good.”

19.

At the end of the day the accustomed circle of students gathered around Hypatia. She answered a few questions briefly then said she had to leave. She had something to attend to. She took her way to the Prefect's palace in the official quarter.

That morning when Hypatia passed by Levi the stationer on her way to the School, the old man was not his habitual cheerful self.

"Are you not well, Levi?", asked Hypatia.

"Healthwise I'm all right. Even better than I have reason to expect at my age."

But the answer did not ring contented. The sad tone belied the satisfaction implied in the words.

Hypatia fixed her eyes on him inquiringly. Levi heaved a heavy sigh. He spoke. With Hypatia he could speak freely. The Christian Patriarch Cyrillus had never concealed his animosity towards the Jews. Now there was no doubt that he was determined to drive all Jews out of the city.

Hypatia listened, pained by the man's pain. There was little she could say to comfort the old man, but, without speaking it, she determined to do something about it. She would speak to Orestes. So, as soon as she got to the School, she sent word to the Prefect that she would be passing by his office after school.

Normally she would go to see Orestes without having to give him advance notice. They were good friends and she was always welcome. But today she wanted to make sure he would be there and would make time to hear what she wanted to talk about.

Their friendship began soon after Orestes was appointed as Roman prefect. At first she would visit him for some official business connected with the School or the like, but invariably the conversation would diverge to questions of a general cultural and philosophical nature. She soon discovered to her delight that Orestes was keenly interested in her mathematical and philosophical work. Often they would converse for hours. Her Neoplatonism did not fit well with his Aristotelean approach, but that difference itself made their intellectual encounters highly fruitful and invigorating. She often reflected sadly on the contrast between her duels with Orestes – duels that left them both happier and better friends – and her debate with one whom

she once loved, a debate that proved to be between two non-communicating worlds and that ended in irremediable estrangement. But these were not her thoughts for the moment.

Orestes welcomed her with his customary cheer and warmth, but he knew from the fact that she had given him advance notice of the visit that this will not be the usual philosophical excursion. He waited for her to speak and she lost no time. She told him of her conversation with Levi that morning.

She concluded, "Cyrillus is evidently taking things into his hands and he seems determined to move against the Jews. You should do something about it, Orestes."

Orestes looked vacantly into nothing for a while then said dejectedly, "What can I do?"

"You are invested with power. You are responsible for the safety and wellbeing of all law-abiding residents of the city."

Orestes said resignedly, "I have the authority of the state; I have the arm of the state; but Cyrillus wields the power of the mob. I cannot risk inciting an insurgency."

Hypatia felt sad. What is the use of all our philosophizing about the good and the true when in the actual world we are enslaved by other rules?

Waving that thought away, Hypatia tried again, "The violence and counter-violence between the Christians and the Jews has been on the increase. At first, we saw that as the irresponsible action of the rabble on both sides. But Patriarch Cyrillus is inflaming the situation not only in speech but also by the provocations of his agents. His Nitrian monks see themselves as waging a holy war. In your capacity as civil ruler you should tell him that he is endangering the peace of the community."

Orestes spoke slowly, not that he was looking for words but because every word was painful to utter. "I am as worried and as grieved as you are, Hypatia. But you know that my relations with the Patriarch are already overstrained. I am afraid anything I say to him will be counter-productive."

Orestes resumed, "My duty towards you as a friend, dear Hypatia, obliges me to warn you. You should be careful. The Patriarch blames my 'corruption' on you. Your teaching is sending tremors among the Christians. I know that they speak of you as a witch with powers of sorcery and black magic. You know what that can lead to."

Hypatia: "What do you want me to do?"

Orestes: "You are a great mathematician, Hypatia. For a while concentrate on your mathematical work. It is less dangerous."

Hypatia: "I have never neglected my mathematical work. In my mathematics classes I have brilliant students who are doing excellent work."

My commentaries on the *Arithmetica* of Diophantus and the *Conics* of Apollonios are being studied in Athens, Rome, Carthage, everywhere. But I will not drop or neglect my philosophical classes. I will not betray my philosophy students.”

Hypatia spoke with heat. Orestes knew she could not choose otherwise. He felt sorry for her. He envied her. With a sense of profound humiliation he felt there was an infinite distance between her principled disregard of practical consequences and his calculating submission to political exigencies. Theirs were two incommensurate worlds.

A few days later it happened. Hordes of fanatic Christians invaded the Jewish Quarter. Synagogues were plundered, homes were set ablaze. Those who were not killed, men, women, and children, were chased out of the city. The following morning, in the lecture hall, Hypatia sadly saw that Hannah and Baruch were not there.

Later Hypatia learned that Orestes had tried to handle the situation. He led a column of soldiers in an attempt to restore peace and order. But a horde of Nitrian monks overwhelmed his force. They dragged him out of his carriage and stoned him. He could easily have been killed.

20.

All those around Hypatia, her friends, her neighbours, her colleagues, her students, were growing increasingly concerned about her safety. Cyrillus made no secret of his wish to see her put out of the way. Rumours spread about what was being plotted for her. Insinuations in high places, explicit threats, were reported. Only Hypatia herself seemed oblivious to all that.

Three days earlier, Orestes had sent her an urgent note by special messenger urging her to be cautious. He insisted she should give up her habit of walking to the School and back. She should, he admonished, use her carriage in all her goings and comings and should always be accompanied by a bodyguard. Her students repeatedly pleaded with her to be careful and take the threats addressed to her more seriously.

Mariam came to her office. She was evidently perturbed.

Hypatia, concerned, asked her, "What is it, Mariam?"

Mariam: "Please, Hypatia, please take care. If those fanatics hurt you, I'll feel personally responsible. I'll never forgive myself."

Hypatia: "Oh, Mariam dear, don't worry about me. They have been slinging mud at me for a long, long time. What else will they do?"

Mariam: "Those who destroyed the Museion will stop at nothing."

Mariam was in tears. She continued, "I know their fury. I know their insanity. I swear, I swear .. if those Nitrian monks hurt you, I will openly declare my repudiation of the Church and all it stands for. If they hurt you, I don't care if I die or if they torture me to death."

Hypatia rose from her seat, put her arms round Mariam, who was now sobbing, and spoke soothingly. "Come, Mariam, calm yourself. I have already yielded to Orestes' advice and sent for my carriage. I will not be walking home."

Mariam: "Perhaps that is not enough. Hypatia, you should leave this city, at least for a while. Go to Athens or to Rome. Not to Constantinople, no. Hypatia, you're too precious to put yourself at risk. You must preserve yourself, not only for us your students who love you, but for the whole of humanity."

Hypatia patted her gently, held up her chin, looked lovingly into her tearful eyes, and said softly, "Go now. My carriage will readily be here to take me home. Go."

21.

Hypatia mounted her carriage and the vehicle drove off. Before long, tumultuous noises could be heard. They did not seem to be distant. Christophoros looked to left and to right, but before he could see where he might turn to safety, round a corner came the waves of the Nitrian monks and the rabble that followed them. Soon they had surrounded the carriage.

The carriage door was opened.
Hands stretched in.
Hypatia looked at the crowd and saw one face.
One word she whispered: "You!?"
The last word she ever uttered.
They dragged her down.
They tore her clothes.
Naked they dragged her.
The stream of blood was buried by the trampling feet.
Into the church they went.
They shredded her flesh with potsherds.
They burned her shredded body.
They burned her books.
Darkness fell.

Postlude

and

The Book that Mariam Dropped

Postlude

The blood-red disk of the setting sun
slowly sank behind a mountain of dark clouds.
On a rock jutting over the moaning sea
Mariam stood gazing with unseeing eyes
with a book held to her breast.
The tip of the red disk plunged into the dark deep;
Mariam dropped the book;
she plunged into the moaning deep.

The Book that Mariam Dropped

At the top of the first sheet of the book there stood:

“Here I record what I recall of Hypatia’s lectures, conversations, answers to questions, and the like. I may have here and there put in words of my own or thoughts of my own. I do not call these mine. I owe them all to Hypatia.”

When I picked up the book, it had been drenched by rain. Many pages, many passages, were blotted and illegible. What was clear or what I could make out with reasonable certainty, I have reproduced as accurately as I could.

From Hypatia's lectures on the myth of Isis and Osiris:

To show how I relate the *Parmenides* of Plato to the Isis and Osiris myth I have first to show how I read the *Parmenides*. But again, before I show how I read the *Parmenides*, I have to refer to the *Lysis* which, in my view, gives the core message of the *Parmenides* in a nutshell. The subject of the *Lysis* is friendship, not as a moral principle but as a relationship. The dialogue begins as yet another Socratic discourse, but Plato then wanders into regions of his own.

In the *Lysis* we find the best exemplification of the principle of the transience of all particular actuality, which, in the myth we found represented by Nephthys. From the examination of relation the dialogue proceeds to reveal the relativity of all particularity. Hence I think that in the *Lysis* we have the key to the understanding of the *Parmenides*.

Following the first didactic discourse with *Lysis*, the first inquiry into the meaning of friendship explores the ambiguities of the word *philos*. But this is not merely a cautionary discourse against linguistic obscurity — nothing in Plato or in philosophy is a 'mere'. The discovery of the inescapable fluidity of all language brings with it the thought that as all words, so also all things denoted by words, are never a fixed 'this' or 'that' but a nexus of relations spreading throughout all being. We may find the explicit expression of this insight developing and unfolding slowly through the dialogues, but I see it as an undercurrent running steadily from the elenctic discourses through the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, the *Republic*, until it emerges in the expanses of the *Sophist* and the *Timaeus* — and even beyond that in Plotinus.

When I say that no word has a definitively fixed meaning, someone might say that the names of metals for instance, such as gold or iron, are free of ambiguity. I answer that such words are not meanings but pointers. They only obtain borrowed meaning by reference to a specimen or actual context — a specimen or context which has all the fluidity and impermanence of all existent actuality. A general statement about gold or iron which has universal validity purchases that validity at the price of abstraction, that is, by distancing itself from the particularity which is the condition of actuality.

The properly dialectical part of *Lysis* begins at the point where Socrates says that the thing he had always wished for above all else was the

possession of a friend. He goes on: Far from having this, I do not even know — but instead of saying, as in the properly elenctic discourses: I do not even know what friendship is or what a friend is, he says: I do not even know in what way one friend becomes friend to another. Plato clearly means to raise a problem essentially different from the problem raised in the *Euthyphro*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, or *Republic* I. The discussion following suggests, and, I believe, is meant to suggest, the principle that is given explicit expression in the *Sophist*, the *Timaeus*, and the *Philebus*: Nothing ever is in itself just what it is in itself: everything has its true being and its true meaning in its interrelatedness with everything else, with all that is. This is the principle underlying the dictum which Plato emphasizes in the *Republic*: “He who sees things as a whole is philosophical, he who doesn’t, isn’t.” This is also the underlying lesson of the *Parmenides*, the metaphysical dimension of the *Parmenides*.

Plato probably was also simultaneously thinking of the logical problem of relations and relative terms. But I think the metaphysical dimension and the metaphysical insight are more fundamental both in the *Lysis* and in the *Parmenides*.

So the whole of the *Lysis* after the didactic conversation, shows that every statement, which may originally reveal some true perspective, wandering beyond or dragged outside its proper context, can be overturned.

Thus after Plato has introduced the thought that it is only what is neither good nor bad that can seek the good – a favourite formulation of his – and after carefully introducing and elucidating the distinction between what Aristotle was to name property and accident, and after stating the conclusion in exuberant tones, he makes Socrates suddenly recoil, fearing that it was all nothing but a dream. I think this passage was meant by Plato to convey the most fundamental lesson in philosophy: Never rest in the illusion that you have taken hold of final truth!

So in what follows Socrates overturns all the previous conclusions. In the space of a single page, Plato introduces the problem of infinite regress (which is mentioned briefly in the *Republic* and features prominently in the *Parmenides*) and the seminal notion of the final or ultimate good, commingled together. The idea of an ultimate good carries with it the idea of the relativity of all particular good, which in turn is related to the idea of the imperfection and insufficiency of all that is determinate, particular, finite. Every particular good is good as a means to something else. In the end only the activity itself, the creativity, the ceaseless affirmation and realization of the good, is good in itself.

Then by a playful turn of the argument, Socrates humours the mood of the two boys Menexenus and Lysis and the somewhat elder lad Hippothales by drawing a conclusion that is as good as, but no better than, any of the earlier ones, as Socrates himself immediately goes on to show. As in all of the elenctic discourses, the dialogue ends in apparently total *aporia*.

Before I attempt to show how I read the insight of the *Parmenides* into the myth of Isis and Osiris, let me say that I see the *Parmenides* as the dialectical union of the insights of the Heraclitian and the Parmenidean philosophies. Heraclitus saw that all phenomenal existence, all particular actuality, every this and every such, is impermanent and fleeting. This I call the Principle of Transience. Parmenides shows us the other side of the coin: to be real and to be intelligible is to be permanent and perfect and whole. This is a primary demand of reason, which demand I call the Principle of Intelligibility. For a thing to be mutable is to declare its own unreality, to be imperfect is to show its want of what it is not; the finite demands completion to be intelligible. This I call the Principle of Integrity. Plato saw that not only we can escape neither the insight of Heraclitus nor the insight of Parmenides but also that each of these two calls for completion by the other. Without the Parmenidean principle the world we live in is unintelligible. Without the Heraclitian principle the world is a reason-mocking impossibility. That is the lesson of the *Parmenides* in a nutshell. The one must breed the many or it is not even one. The many must be one or they not only cannot be intelligible, but they cannot even simply be. Every one of the propositions of the *Parmenides* is a variant of this dialectical union of the Heraclitian and Parmenidean insights. Plotinus saw this most clearly.

While Plotinus has found in the *Parmenides* profound meaning, many scholars have seen it as puzzling. To me its message seems to be translucently clear. So there must be something puzzling about it after all. Perhaps the explanation lies in the mastery with which Plato keeps the metaphysical dimension or metaphysical implications completely submerged under the logical dimensions and implications.

The logical and metaphysical aspects or dimensions of the *Parmenides* are inseparable. They were not separate or separable for Plato. As for Parmenides, so also for Plato, to be intelligible and to be were the same thing. Whatever Plato may have had in the foreground of his attention when writing the *Parmenides* – and logical questions seem to have been very much on Plato's mind in his later years when the *Parmenides* was probably

written – the ontological undertones could not at any point have been absent for him. The metaphysical significations that Plotinus could read in the second part were of the essence of Plato's philosophical outlook.

Heraclitus and Parmenides both had profound but opposed insights into the nature of things. Heraclitus saw that all things in the world around us are evanescent, ceaselessly mutating. As Plato puts it in the *Timaeus*, you cannot even say of any given thing 'this' or 'that'; all you can say is 'here is a such', and as you say it, it is already a different such.

Parmenides saw that, to a mind that demands intelligibility and understanding, the being of the imperfect, the particular hemmed with limitations and negations, the mutable, is necessarily questionable. How can the imperfect be? To the mind all being is a mystery, yet the being of the imperfect is an affront to the mind that leaves it permanently smarting. For, for Parmenides, to be intelligible and to be is the same thing. Hence, only what is whole and perfect can be. All that Parmenides says in specific terms in characterizing THE ONE THAT IS, is metaphor and myth, and could be nothing but that, for how can you specify or characterize what is beyond all particular characteristics? The essence is only this: only what is whole and perfect can be thought of as real.

Plato appropriated the insights of both Heraclitus and Parmenides and never gave up or closed his eyes to either. But they could not stand side by side in the same mind without reconciliation. In Socrates' view of the world as falling into an intelligible realm on the one side and a perceptible realm on the other side – an intelligible realm that confers on the perceptible its reality and a perceptible realm that lends the intelligible its actuality – Plato found the reconciliation. And just as he found that the flux of Heraclitus had to be bathed in the rays of the intelligible to be capable of being thought, so also he found that the One of Parmenides had to accept the humiliation of passing through the evanescence and contradictions of actual existence if it is to be anything to us finite, particular minds.

The language of birth and generation is congenital to Plato's thought. The concept of procreation in beauty, which he introduces in the *Symposium*, is fundamental to his understanding of reality and intelligence. Yet at the opposite pole stands his conception of the eternity of the forms — immutable, unchangeable forms. The all-consuming Heraclitian Fire ordaining fluidity and transience for all existents strove against the all-pervading permanence of the Parmenidean One, and the clash erupted in the all-negating dialectic of the *Parmenides*.

The intelligible is in its own nature supra-temporal, and in this sense eternal. But it comes into being and passes out of being. An original thought, a poem, a song, is eternal, yet is born and passes away. Nothing that is determinate is everlasting, for all that exists is transient.

The self-evidence of an idea or principle does not endow it with finality. The self-evidence of the idea or principle means that it needs no justification and can issue in harmonious and consistent consequences. Every good philosophical system is such an unfoldment of self-evident ideas and principles. But the self-evident idea or principle can always be placed in a wider or a different context, and is then seen to be imperfect. The idea of beauty does not call for 'derivation' from a higher principle, and the ascent to the idea of Beauty in the *Symposium* is an ascent to ultimate Reality.

According to the *Republic*, to my mind, dialectic, destroying all hypotheses, is not meant to lead to or end in any first principles, but to a new dimension of the Socratic principle of ignorance. Dialectic as the consummate exercise of reason ends in the revelation that no determinate formulation of thought can be finally true: the only *alêtheia* □ is the active *phronêsis* □ itself. Thus understood, the logical and metaphysical aspects of the *Parmenides* are inseparable. Even if we suppose that Plato had the logical aspect uppermost, or even solely, in his mind when writing the *Parmenides*, we cannot fault Plotinus for finding clearly writ in it the metaphysical significations to which he gave an original expression in his philosophy.

The examination of the forms in the first part of the *Parmenides*, then, is not a criticism of the Socratic conception of intelligible forms, which was the foundation of the whole of Socrates' and Plato's philosophical outlook, but a critical examination of certain tentative developments and outgrowths of the conception. I see the introduction of Zeno's argument in the opening section as an indication of the intent and purpose of the whole dialogue. Parmenides' rationalistic monism had been attacked by his opponents as involving inescapable contradictions. Zeno, as he is made to state explicitly, was responding, not by arguing for Parmenides' position, but by showing that the opponents' position led to equally damaging contradictions. What are we to conclude from this? The Parmenidean One being, like the Good of the *Republic*, beyond being and beyond knowledge, could not, strictly, be characterized in any specific terms. So even the affirmations of The Way of Truth were only permissible by special concession. The essence of Reality is strictly ineffable: you cannot contain what is perfect in the moulds of thought and language which, by their very nature, must be limited,

determinate, imperfect. In Zeno's enterprise Plato finds confirmation of his own conception of dialectic as the destruction of all hypotheses (postulates): no determinate formulation of thought is immune to logical refutation. In what follows of the dialogue we are to see the application of this principle, first to various articulations employing the concept of intelligible forms, and then to various articulations employing the concept of *to hen* (the One) or *to on* (Being). If that is so, how can we still maintain that in the arguments of the *Parmenides* we can discern metaphysical insights? The answer is simple: If we are examining our concept of Being (Reality), how can we not at the same time be looking into what Being (Reality) means for us? For Parmenides had spoken truly: the intelligible is the same thing as the real.

The opponents of Parmenides have shown that his conception of the One leads to contradictions. Zeno has shown that the assumption of plurality in things leads to contradictions. That should not spell the end of rational discourse. The principle that all determinate formulations of thought involve contradiction is liable to abuse in two directions: on the one hand it can lead to the suicidal irrationality of Antisthenes, on the other hand it can lead to the corruptive eristics of a Euthydemus. The destruction of all postulates demanded by dialectic is necessary for freeing the human mind from the bondage of preconceptions, prejudices, superstitions, in all areas — science, religion, and even quotidian practical dealings. But to live, we have to work, to think, to formulate theories, to lay down maxims and rules, and for all of these the foundation has to be certain 'accepted' ideas — accepted but not immune to examination and demolition when need be.

Socrates sums up the argument of Zeno. If things are many, they will necessarily be both like and unlike. (No matter how he showed this.) But things like cannot be unlike and things unlike cannot be like. Therefore things cannot be many. Socrates rightly says that Zeno was simply reiterating Parmenides' thesis in a different formulation. Parmenides had said that *to on* (Being, Reality) is one, and the One is all there is, and so the many can have no being. Zeno argued that the being of the many involves impossibilities. Plato knew that any statement can be falsified. That is the gist of what the *Republic* says about dialectic. To refute this position and that leaves us nowhere. The many — all existents — are shot through and through with contradiction. But they are there; they stare us in the face; we ourselves are part of that being that is not. The task of philosophy is not to show, or not stop at showing, that finite, particular existents are not, but to show how and why that is so. That is what the whole of Plato's philosophy, culminating in the *Republic*, does when it reveals that the whole world of given actualities is insubstantial shadow and transient becoming that only

obtains reality in the eternity of creative intelligence. This is my formulation, but I believe it does not falsify Plato's insight. The *Parmenides* adds nothing to the essence of Plato's philosophy. It only shows that, starting from the Parmenidean *to on* (Being) and the Parmenidean *to hen* (the One) we find, as we found in the *Republic*, that the imperfect being of existents issues from the One. The One breeds, generates, the many. The many without the One are an impossibility; the One without the many is unthinkable. This is Plotinus, but it issues from Plato as necessarily as the many issue from the One in the *Parmenides*.

Socrates proceeds to attack the problem. Existents, whether one or many, are riddled with contradictions. In the sequel, the One begins to crack as soon as we affirm that it *is*, or that it is *one*. But we have the concepts, the intelligible forms, of likeness and unlikeness, of unity and plurality. These ideas as such, are stable, unalterable. But there is nothing to prevent their being found along each other in things. Likeness is not unlikeness; unity is not plurality. But the like can be unlike, and as the *Parmenides* of the dialogue will soon be demonstrating, if we say that the one is many, that the one is not many, that the many are one, that the many are not one, all of these positions (hypotheses) can be shown to be true and all can also be shown to be false. This sums up the second part of the *Parmenides*.

The arguments of Zeno of Elea showed not only the insufficiency of all linguistic formulations but also the imperfection and contradictoriness of all particular actuality. This is the logico-ontological lesson of the *Parmenides*.

Paradox is the shock that proclaims that a concept has presumed to annex territory to which it has no legal title. Or, changing the metaphor we may say: every concept is a fiction; when it forgets the humility proper to its insubstantiality, Reason shows it to be nothing but a bubble that explodes with a loud sound. From Zeno's riddles, to the Third Man and beyond, we will find nothing but useful conceptual fictions transgressing their proper jurisdiction.

The second part of the *Parmenides* is wholly what Plato plainly says it is, an exercise in dialectic (in the sense of the *Republic*) — an exercise intended to bring out the twin core-lessons of dialectic: (1) Logically, no determinate statement is simply true; no determinate statement can be permitted the mortal hubris of pretending to finality; if it does it can always be shown to be false; to understand any statement we have to attend not only to what it says but also to what it does not say. (2) Metaphysically, no particular, finite,

determinate thing can claim simply to be; in itself and by itself it cannot have the intelligibility of reality; the question can always be put to it, "Whence and wherefore art thou?"; to be justified, its particular, finite, determinate actuality has to be effaced in other than itself. And all of this is nothing but the germination of the seed of the Socratic elenchus.

I can understand how Plotinus could find his whole philosophy clearly written between the lines of the *Parmenides*. I too have shared Plotinus' experience.

The error of the Neoplatonists, and in some measure of Plotinus himself, was the attempt to give fixity to insights that can only find expression in fugitive metaphor or self-annihilating argument. They should have learned from Plato, particularly from the *Republic* and from the *Parmenides* itself, that no determinate formulation of thought can claim definitive validity.

Throughout the arguments of the second part of the *Parmenides* we have phrases such as 'in a sense', 'but not in every sense', 'as such', 'in so far as', and the young Aristoteles in his responses uses such expressions as 'The argument seems to lead to that conclusion', 'It seems possible to argue in that way'. This is part and parcel of the lesson of the dialogue. The whole may be regarded as a warning against what I have elsewhere called the treachery of words. No statement, however carefully phrased, however cautiously hemmed in with qualifications, can be accepted without reservation.

Thus, if we hand over without reservation our living intelligence to words or to a logic that forgets its inescapable limitations, then, as the *Parmenides* concludes, whatever we assume to be or not to be, it will seem that both the One and the Many, will be, both in relation to themselves and to each other, all things and no-thing.

In the *Parmenides* all determinate formulations give rise to their negatives; necessarily, since any determinate formulation is grounded in negation. What is – any finite, particular existent – is what it is by being other than what it is not, and therefore is not truly because what is truly is the whole, is all that is. The *Parmenides* is an extended demonstration of the destruction of all hypotheses given in the *Republic* as the essence of that dialectic which is the exercise of *phronêsis* in which we find our proper reality in the activity of creative intelligence. We may thus be justified in naming ultimate Reality the Act — and at once recanting our blasphemy, for no name can name ultimate Reality. Only creative intelligence is ultimately

real. Only in creative intelligence is all being and all becoming intelligible. As the fount and ground of all being and becoming, we also name it Creative Eternity.

The philosopher seeks reality. Heraclitus tells us that the world and all things in the world are insubstantial fleeting shadows. Parmenides tells us that the real and the intelligible are one thing. He goes on to tell us that to be intelligible the real must be one, indivisible, unchangeable, immovable. In the *Parmenides* Plato examines that one being of Parmenides and finds that in itself and of itself it breeds multiplicity and mutability and contradictoriness. In the *Sophist* he finds that the Parmenidean One taken as such without qualification is without life and without intelligence. Socrates had taught that thought is our life and our true being and, at the same time, that all particular thought is steeped in contradiction and falsity. Only the active intelligence, only the exercise of intelligence that discovers the contradictoriness of its own thought and destroys all formulations of that thought — only that active intelligence is true life and true being. So Plato's quest for reality in the *Republic* leads to *phronêsis* as the highest *alêtheia*, and that *phronêsis* finds its own reality in perpetually destroying its own successive incarnations in determinate thought.

So, again, what is Reality? Let us try another approach. For if it be true that we can never possess Reality in the form of a final truth but can only glimpse Reality in the process of our quest for the real, then the philosophic quest must be a never ending rediscovery of our own reality in ever-crumbling edifices of mythology. But our philosophical mythology will be a conceptual mythology rather than our traditional image-mythology. Let us try.

We seek reality and we find reality not in appearances, not in mutable existents, but in what is beyond phenomena, in what lends phenomena their share of reality. Yet to seek reality apart from the phenomenal only leads us to illusion and self-deception as in cases of deluded mystic experiences. To arrive at what is beyond the phenomena we have to pass through the phenomena. It is only by overcoming the unreality of the phenomenal through the dialectical disclosure of its ontological insufficiency that we arrive at reality. Thus in Plato's allegory of the cave, the prisoner released from the cave has to pass through shadows and images to the vision of the sun. The mysticism in which the philosophical exercise ends is not a denial

of, is not blindness to, the actuality of the objective world, but is a discovery of the dependence of the objective world on transcendent reality.

These insights are universal. We discover them in myths, in mystery cults, in mystic outpourings, in metaphysical systems, because they relate to the one reality we know, the reality we find in ourselves, the reality in which we find ourselves, for we have no being but in that reality, and we know that reality only in our proper being.

Hence, all genuine philosophy is oracular proclamation voicing insight into the philosopher's own moral reality. Since that moral reality transcends all particularity and all finitude, it is strictly ineffable and cannot be encompassed by any determinate formulation. Hence all genuine philosophical expression must inevitably be clothed in metaphor, allegory, and myth. If the mythical expression of the philosophical insight is not to turn into superstition – the bane of all established religion – it must constantly be questioned and shown to be inadequate. — Those theologians who say that the nature of God can only be expressed in negatives have had an inkling of this. But their position is subject to a double defect. If they adhere to their principle strictly and consistently, their God will have to be nothing but a blank unknowable unknown. In practice, however, having precluded any reasoned and any intelligible conception of God, they admit all manner of unreasoned, unintelligent, and unintelligible beliefs — unquestioned and unquestionable, a denial of the right to think and to understand, a negation of the birthright to human dignity.

It is futile to argue for the reality of the One or the Good or Intelligence. If we reserve the term 'existence' to the objective, the given, the finite, the particular, if, in other words, we oppose existence to reality, as I do, then it becomes nonsensical to speak of the One, the Good, Intelligence, as existent. This, in one aspect, is a matter of terminology, and the relegation of terms is arbitrary and could be reversed. But beyond the question of terminology there is the insistence on the meaning of reality as distinct from all the finite, particular, mutable phenomena of our surrounding world. This is the distinction Plato emphasized in the seminal passage about the war of the Gods and the Giants in the *Sophist*.

I say that it is meaningless to argue for the reality of the One, the Good, Intelligence, because these are not existents but ideas which give meaning to objective existence. These ideas are principles of intelligibility and thus of reality. For, with Parmenides and Plato, I identify reality and intelligibility,

though perhaps with a difference in terminology. What I call the dimensions of Reality are ideas without which all the givennesses of experience remain unintelligible. The dimensions of Reality, the first principles of our philosophy, are intelligible and give intelligibility to existents. It is in this sense that I say they are real and are the only reality we know. Reality is the intelligibility obtaining in our mind, its source and ground is the active intelligence, the intelligent activity in us, and that is our reality and our whole dignity and worth.

We, as philosophers, do not speak of any reality outside of us, but we also know that, as finite individuals, we are not the source of reality but are ourselves grounded in Reality. Hence we say that, for being, for the world, to be ultimately intelligible, we have to think of ultimate Reality as Creative Intelligence. This is the insight we find in Plato and in Plotinus – not a theory, not a metaphysical system, but the view that our creative intelligence, our loving affirmation of all positive being, is our reality and our proper worth, and is all we know of Reality. – All else is myth and allegory: if it forget that it is nothing but myth and allegory, then it becomes deadly superstition.

We humans are essentially reasoning beings. That is our privilege, our glory, and our tragedy. In reasoning we live our characteristically human life, we experience our distinctively human capability. We have perhaps finer and worthier capabilities: the capability of love, of the enjoyment of beauty, or simply the enjoyment of the sense of being alive and well. But I suspect that other creatures have these capabilities. And the kind of thinking that may be dubbed problem-solving is not a monopoly of humans. But building systems of abstract concepts seems to be proper to humans. When we build systems of abstract concepts we live – strictly speaking – in intelligible universes of our own making.

The intelligible universe we create may be a model of the movement of the stars and planets. We may then fancy that we have objective knowledge. All that we can with justice say is that the phenomena obligingly fit our model, or, in our scholarly jargon, our model saves the appearances. I will, perhaps cravenly, refrain from pressing the point further in the present context because the nature of scientific knowledge is not my present concern.

In other areas, by building systems of abstract concepts we live in moral, social, cultural worlds of our own making and experience the emotions of

love, friendship, loyalty, pride, shame, envy, hate – the whole range of good and bad emotions and sentiments – all on the basis of values and concepts of our own creation. And here comes the danger. For while the values and concepts generating good emotions and sentiments expand and enrich our life, the values and concepts generating bad emotions and sentiments cramp and corrupt our creativity and vitality.

Further we may and do build systems of abstract concepts that give us imaginative universes peopled with spirits and powers and gods – or a God – that we delude ourselves into thinking of as existing independently of our thought. Even when those spirits and powers are represented as benign, it is only when we acknowledge them our own creations that they constitute a culture in which we live as free and intelligent beings. Even when our gods are benign, if we see them as our creators and not our creatures, our intelligence is stymied. When our gods are cruel, evil, unreasonable, we live on earth in the hell we made them ready for us in another world, and we hate and kill our fellow human beings in obedience to the evil gods we have appointed to rule our world.

Thus it is that our reasoning is both our glory and our nemesis: and that is why we must live incessantly building ideal worlds, for without them we are sub-human, and incessantly destroying our ideal worlds, for when we no longer see them as our own creation, we no longer have intelligence however clever we may be.

All being is affirmation. All affirmation is intelligence. No being can be or persist without intelligence. This is a statement of faith, or, if you will, a fancy. It can neither be proved nor disproved. But without it all being is a puzzle that mocks our understanding. To my mind, it is only when we see intelligence as the ground and root of all being that the intelligibility we find in things and the intelligence we find in ourselves are understandable. There is intelligence in us. This intelligence is the one reality I cannot deny or escape. I cannot see how this intelligibility and intelligence can come from things I find unintelligible in themselves. Hence I see this intelligence as the ultimate fount of all reality. And I see this ultimate intelligence as affirmative and creative. As affirmative it cherishes all being, values all being, loves all being. Creative intelligence is good and is the source of all good and all beauty. When we see ourselves as having our being in this primal intelligence, when we see that our true being is to be in this intelligence, then we are good; then we value nothing above the affirmation

of our being as intelligence. If we all came to see our true being, our true worth, our true dignity, in intelligence and in nothing else, then we would have a humanity living in complete harmony and mutual love. That is a dream; but without this dream, is life worth living?

In my allegorization of the *muthos* and in the parallels I draw between it and the meanings we can read into the works of philosophers and into other belief systems, my purpose is twofold. First, I want to suggest that the myths, the traditional beliefs, and the philosophical theories, all give expression to a reality we find in ourselves but cannot completely comprehend. Secondly, I want to suggest that all these modes of expression of the reality that is in us are alike mythical albeit in different ways. To take these various expressions as true statements representing actual things outside us is foolish. To take any particular one of these modes of expression as the only true representation of reality is madness. On the other hand, to confine human thought with Democritus and Leucippus, with Epicurus and Lucretius, to observable happenings is to impoverish human culture. We need myth but we have to acknowledge it to be myth.

Remember that while it is legitimate for us to creatively engender, work out, philosophical meanings from the *muthos*, and while it is reasonable to suppose that the myth was originally inspired by a dim glimmering of metaphysical insights, it is fanciful and irrational to find definite symbolism in the details of the story and to hold that the symbolism was deliberately intended by the originators of the tale. With sufficient dexterity we can derive any meanings we want from any given text or story. It is all right to do that if we know what we are doing. To say that the meanings we derive from the story were what was in the mind of the author of the story is to start on a slippery way that ends in insanity. We have a beautiful tale and we are entitled to take it as material out of which we work out original thoughts of ours. We are not entitled to go beyond that.

Thought operates by drawing distinctions, by breaking up a whole into separate pieces. In the process of understanding, the mind necessarily violates the wholeness, the integrity, of the real. In so doing it creates fictitious entities. Thought performs all its life-supporting, life-preserving work through these fictions, on all levels, from the most mundane, in which

the most commonplace objects peopling our world are what they are for us only by virtue of thought, to the most abstruse mathematical and dialectical reasoning in which the mind deals with pure forms. In the *Parmenides* Plato breaks up the One and breaks up Being to work out the contradictory implications of taking the One or taking Being as an all-sufficient concept.

By drawing distinctions, by fragmenting the whole, we solve problems, we theorize, we think consequentially. But only when we return to the whole do we have insight and understanding. This is the secret of the Socratic elenchus. In the dialectical examination of an idea Socrates carries out various analyses of the idea, revealing that none of them, nor all of them taken together, are adequate to the essence of the idea. The *aporia* with which the examination invariably ends intimates to us that it is the idea itself that is meaningful and sheds meaning on all the elements we make use of in our various analyses.

On the way, in the course of the dialectical examination, we gain clarity and orderliness of thought, but it is the creative *aporia*, sending us back to the self-evidence of the idea, that is the inestimable gift of the Socratic elenchus. As Socrates has it: It is by Beauty that all things beautiful are beautiful. Aristotle, by representing the Socratic elenchus as a search for definitions, has obliterated the true significance of the Socratic quest, and has instituted a misunderstanding that is doing damage even today. It is unfortunate that the authority of the great Aristotle makes it difficult for many to rid themselves of this misunderstanding.

Let me sum up the outcome of my philosophical quest in these words: I have searched for truth and have found one certainty. There is reality and there is worth within me. My life will have meaning and value only when I preserve that reality and that worth within me. I am further convinced that all search for reality and value outside the human soul is vain: all reality and all value presumed to be found apart from the human soul is an illusion. It is in this sense that I find that the philosophical life is the proper and highest life for a human being — the philosophical life, the exercise of reason, being the constant affirmation of the reality and worth of the creative intelligence of the human being. — I searched for truth and found one certainty: the creative intelligence in us is the locus, the fount, the ground of the only reality and the only value I know of, albeit this one certainty is strictly ineffable.

Eternity does not preclude change. If it did, eternity would be a static perpetuated moment of vacuity — that's a nonsensical jumble of words, I know, for it seeks to express an impossibility. Eternity is the transcendent dimension of reality which lends the transient and ephemeral what being the transient and ephemeral has. Eternity endures in the transient and is the duration of the transient. Again, every one of the statements I have been making can be contradicted in the same way as every proposition in Plato's *Parmenides* was shown to be contradictible, and for the same reason, the reason that Plato meant us to glimpse through the all-destroying dialectic of the dialogue — that all determinate formulation of thought, all determinate manifestation of being, must pass away.

Let me go back to clarifying my conception of eternity. I said: Eternity endures in the transient and is the duration of the transient. To me this amounts to saying that eternity is creative reality. A lyrical poet does not sit down to her or his desk and say: I will compose a lyric. Nor does she or he work on extraneous material to execute a premeditated plan. A poet is in a state of emotion, a poet is at a particular moment alive, living a particular mode of life, a particular moment of life. That person, that mode of life, that moment of life, issues forth creatively in song. The emotion, the feelings, the fleeting images, have their evanescent being in the transcendent reality of the person, and the person has its enduring being in the flow of the fugitive feelings and images. The personality of a person is that person's creativity. The poet is not a creator but is creativity, the person is not an acting agent but is the act. And the ultimately real is not an eternal creator but is Creative Eternity.

In my view, the dream of personal immortality is a vain dream. In moral activity, in artistic creativity, in philosophical understanding, we can participate momentarily in eternity. The sources of the popular belief in personal survival and of the widespread, though by no means universal, desire for personal survival, are easy to point out. Dreams and sentimental attachment to the dear departed are two such sources.

The more sophisticated hope for personal survival rests on a refined appreciation of the superiority of our spiritual experiences and activities to the experiences and activities more closely related to our bodily life. This, for instance, is what we find in the arguments ascribed by Plato to Socrates in the *Phaedo*, especially in the argument from affinity to the divine, in itself a precious gem of philosophical intuition.

But to my mind, the profounder understanding of the superiority of the spiritual life is to be found in the view that in spiritual activity and creativity we live eternally while living temporally; we enjoy our eternity only in and

through our temporal life, when in momentary deeds of love, in fugitive moments of beauty, we transcend the momentary and the fugitive and participate in the eternity of the real.

Personally, I have no desire or longing for an extended continuity of the particular configuration of thoughts and memories that I here and now am. It is enough for me to live from moment to moment and, in the final moment, to merge without distinction in the Whole whence I emerged.

The myth of Isis and Osiris represents the essential tragedy and glory of all finite existence. Finite existence must necessarily be destroyed to rise again in new form. This is the lesson we read in the seed that must die to rise again in a new life. This lesson must have been picked up by humans everywhere very early in their history. We find it in all cultures represented in various myths. So the Christian story of the resurrection belongs to a venerable tradition. It is a version of the death and resurrection of Osiris. This is what I name the Principle of Transience.

The principle of transience announces the essential tragedy of all existence. Whatever comes to be must pass away. Death is the twin of Life. I have spoken of Nephthys as representing this essential tragedy of existence, but we can also take her brother-consort Seth as representing the principle of transience. Seth is the principle of negation without which existence is not possible. Negation is the condition of finite, determinate being, which is existence. The principle of negation as the condition of existence entails the transience of all actual existence: it is tragic but not evil.

Again, Plato's dialectical destruction of all hypotheses, which is necessary for gaining access to a reality that cannot be captured in any determinate formulation of thought — that dialectical destruction of all hypotheses is not unrelated to the principle of transience which declares that all determinate existence must be annihilated in fulfilment of the perpetual actualization of a reality that can never be fixed in any definite actuality. The actual must be evanescent to participate in reality; the real must inhere in finite being hemmed with negation to have actuality: understanding must destroy its hypotheses to have insight into reality; intelligence must formulate contradictory statements to gain intelligibility. Again we find here parallelism with Plato's proposal in the *Philebus* of the Infinite and the Determinate as ultimate principles.

And again we find here analogy with the Christian representation of the eternal Logos as incarnate in a mortal body. I suppose that the Christian

writer who introduced that representation was giving expression to such a metaphysical insight. Unfortunately that poetic expression of what could be seen as a profound metaphysical insight has been degraded by lesser intellects into a dead dogma and now they are wrangling and fighting about whether that incarnation is a one or a two or a two that is one or a one that is two, and whether the two are two natures or two persons or two something else, not knowing that all of those formulations can be inspiring metaphors when accepted as metaphors but turn into stupefying falsehoods when the falsity inherent in the metaphor is ignored, or, to return to Plato, when the hypotheses are not dialectically destroyed but are instituted into deadly superstitions.

The world becomes meaningful only in myth. All culture and all social cohesion rest on a foundation of myth. A civilization might deem itself freed of all superstition, other-worldly dreams, and fanciful representations, and based firmly on objective scientific notions, 'realistic' values, sober principles of expedience. Never is a society, a state, a mighty empire more in the clutch of myth than then. In thinking its first principles and values secure beyond question it is – even while it fancies itself at the height of its vitality and power – already a dead body on the way to decay. Only a stream that never stands still remains fresh and wholesome. Only a culture that knows its foundations are destructible and replaceable remains alive.

Yet, beware the deadly lure of the siren call of myth. Without listening to the song of myth our life is poor and shallow, yet if we do not free ourselves of the captivity of myth we stagnate and rot. The ineffable reality of creative intelligence which is true life can only be given determinate expression in myth. But if we mistake the myth for fact, the myth turns into a dead shell and we are cut off from the living spring from which the myth sprang forth in the first place. Myth turns into superstition and intelligence and insight are no more.

For a long time I sought a theory, a formula, to 'explain' all becoming. Many such 'explanations' had been proposed before, from the condensation and rarefaction of Anaximenes, to the Love and Hate principles of Empedocles, to the emanations of Plotinus, and no doubt many such theories and formulas will continue to be advanced. All of these theories are at bottom metaphors that lend an ideal coherence to the processes of becoming, and this simply means that they give us a sense of ease and satisfaction, they give us a sense of aesthetic contentment in beholding the genesis of one state

of being from another. But does any of that or all of that explain becoming? The mystery of becoming remains a mystery. In the end I came to the conclusion that we have to confess that the mystery of becoming, like the mystery of being, defies explanation. We have to accept it as an ultimate feature of ultimate Reality. That ultimate feature I call the Principle of Creativity. When I say that that lends intelligibility to becoming I do not mean that it explains becoming. I mean that in the Principle of Creativity we rest in the reality of creativity as an ultimate mystery, or, if you prefer to put it that way, we rest in the mystery of creativity as an ultimately self-evident reality.

From Hypatia's answers to students' questions:

Is there mind in the cosmos, in the world we see around us? This is a question which only a fool would rush to answer confidently. Plato told us in the *Sophist* about the ongoing battle of the Gods and the Giants. The Giants would make even of the mind in us a phantom thing not worthy of being dignified with the title of reality. The Gods see mind as the root and source and ground of reality. Now, I am no goddess of course, but you all know that I side with the philosophical Gods. To my mind the notion of a thing, any thing, existing apart from mind, is unintelligible. I cannot see how a thing that is not rooted in mind can be.

But in what sense is there mind in things that we call material? In what sense is there mind in a rock, in a log of wood, in a manufactured article? These are intricate questions about which we can speculate endlessly. Here I would only explain that when I say that I cannot see how there can be anything apart from mind, I am not referring to mind as we habitually know it in ourselves. Mind as we habitually know it in ourselves is conditioned by the limitations and special circumstances of human life. And most manifestations of mind in our normal life and normal experience do not represent what we should see as most valuable or most real in us. Skill and shrewdness and even praiseworthy ingenuity are not what is best and happiest in us.

But mind, or, as I prefer to say, intelligence, is to me an inseparable aspect of life, of creativity, of what is real. So, while I say that, theoretically, I cannot see how there can be a rock that is not grounded in mind, I yet confess that I have no notion as to how mind is related to the rock. But I can say with more confidence that I feel there is mind in a flower or a bee in the

same sense as there is mind in our best moments of tranquility and of happiness. And I have to explain that when I speak of mind in the bee I do not mean the amazing abilities of the bee that put our best skills to shame, but I mean the intelligence inherent in its sheer vitality.

I know that my thoughts on this subject are vague and nebulous and in need of development and clarification, but not more so – I unhesitatingly say – than my thoughts on any other subject, the only difference being that, on the other subjects, I employ terms and notions that seem sensible to you because they sound familiar. But in truth, if we are not to delude ourselves, we must confess that all our theoretical thinking is of necessity always vague and nebulous, in need of constant examination, clarification, and re-formulation. When we forget this, we fall into the gross and deadly delusion of thinking ourselves in possession of final, definitive truth. This, after all, is the core message of the Socratic elenchus and of Plato's conception of dialectic.

I have said this before and I feel it bears repetition. When any of you puts to me any question, I hope that the questioner may never be under the delusion of expecting me to give a true answer. A question for which there can be a true answer is foreign to philosophy. A philosophical question is an invitation, an incitation, to reflection, to the clarification of our own thoughts. If you want true answers, go to the artisans, or go to the theologians! All their answers are absolutely true, even when they are absolutely contradictory! When you ask me a question, then whatever I may say – at least that's what I hope – I am not giving you an answer but am inciting you to look into your own mind.

Apollodoros asked: "You insist that philosophical insight can only be expressed in myth. When we say this, are we not overlooking the importance of truth in human life?"

Hypatia said, "A good question, Apollodoros. Our Aristotelean friends charge us with belittling the value of truth. Far from it. A philosopher hates nothing as she or he hates falsehood and despises nothing as she or he despises deception, above all self-deception. But our Aristotelean friends apply the word truth too widely and too loosely. A witness giving testimony in a court of law, a farmer taking measurements to determine the boundary between his and his neighbour's fields, a physician seeking to determine the cause of a patient's illness, a historian scrutinizing records to picture the happenings at a particular time and place, an astronomer calculating the distance or the orbit of a planet — these various persons deal with different

types of truth but nevertheless they all are concerned with truth and for all of them truth is of paramount value. A witness betraying the truth is no witness, a scientist betraying the truth is no scientist, a doctor betraying the truth is no doctor. So far we are as staunch supporters of truth as any Aristotelean. But metaphysical insight turns into falsehood if it parades as truth. Different kinds of truth are vital in different areas of inquiry. Metaphysical thinking is not an inquiry into things objective; it is an exploration of our own reality — but this phrasing too is likely to be misinterpreted, so let us say that metaphysical thinking is a sightseeing tour within our own reality."

Excerpts from Hypatia's lectures on Plotinus:

Plotinus reinvested the Platonic insights in bold metaphysical allegories. The vigour of his mystic experience dictated the majesterial bearing of his metaphysical allegories. Plotinus did not stop, in the middle of his mystic outpourings, to say, like Plato, "Mind you, this is only myth". But we can do that on his behalf and be thankful that his overbold myths give us a lively insight into reality, a truly vibrant spiritual experience.

Plotinus takes Beauty for the starting-point of his system. Reasonably. For it is in Beauty that living intelligence beholds its reality in perfect immediacy. So Plato in the *Symposium* makes the spiritual ascent end in the vision of Beauty. In the *Republic* the ultimate Reality is the Form of the Good. If we see the Form of the Good as the highest goal of all aspiration, we have no problem in equating it with Beauty.

If then we say that God is the good, or that God is the beautiful, or that God is intelligence, in all of these statements we speak equally truly and equally imperfectly. So the notion that Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty – in whatever form or whatever age it may be proclaimed – is fully vindicated. Truth is only mediately and extraneously vindicated by logic and discursive reasoning.

The final vindication of all truth is the self-evident immediacy of intelligible form. In philosophical truth this is so simply. In the empirical field, this is ultimately so, but we normally have to bring in numerous and complex partial mathemata into the picture to attain a self-evident whole. Every science aims at attaining such a self-evident whole. In the case of the

natural sciences that goal is an ideal that may never be fully and finally achieved. The representations of science are always partial and relative.

Philosophy is different. In philosophical thinking we weave ideal patterns that confer intelligibility on the givennesses of experience. Philosophy, when not deluded, does not pretend to discover or represent actualities outside the human mind. Hence philosophical statements cannot be false in the same way as factual statements can be false. Philosophical statements give us a vision. The vision is valuable inasmuch and in so far as it gives expression to our inner reality, the only reality we know.

But as an expression it is a reflection of reality in a medium other than the reality, whether that medium be regarded as conceptual thinking or as language. Hence we say that philosophical expression is essentially mythical. The mythical nature of philosophical expression is not a defect. It is our means to having communion with reality. But it only serves that purpose when it does not mistake its true nature. When a philosophical statement is mistaken for a factual statement, when the mythical representation of our inner reality is mistaken for a factual representation of objective actuality, when the philosophical expression assumes fixity and finality, then it turns into superstition and empty verbal cant that cuts us off from communion with reality.

Plotinus's philosophy is most valuable in its broad traits, in the insights it inspires, in the total vision it offers. That vision and those insights are not served by his occasional discursive arguments for particular points or his incidental theorizing. Those arguments and theories, like all arguments and all theories, can always be contradicted.

Plotinus occasionally sought to demonstrate determinate points of view and to establish them as true. Plato explored various views, letting opposed views knock and strike against each other, generating sparks that illumine the understanding, and simultaneously revealing that no determinate thought is self-sufficient and whole, thus leading the mind to see that it can only find enlightenment within itself, in the persistent exercise of intelligence, that never finds, nor ever should find, rest in any fixed, final, or definitive formulation.

Plotinus absorbed the divine Platonic vision of Reality, and gave that vision expression in a glorious ideal panorama. I feel it is a pity that he could not rid himself completely of the influence of the common Aristotelean misunderstanding of the role of logical demonstration in philosophy.

Plato created myths and knew that his myths were myths, knew that the reality was behind the myth. Let me here once more explain that when I speak of myth in Plato, I do not have in mind primarily his well-known *muthoi*, but the basic notions and formulations in which he gave expression to his insight into reality. Plotinus perhaps took the myths – Plato’s or his own – somewhat too seriously, like a mystic – and every true philosopher is a mystic – giving verbal articulation to his mystic experience, then believing that that articulation is the only possible or only true expression of the experience. That, to those who are capable of sharing the mystic experience, narrows and enfeebles the experience. To those who are not given to share the experience, it is more damaging, for it places them under the yoke of a vacuous superstition.

So Plotinus enlightens us best when he speaks like a poet, when he sings the joy of his vision; he teaches us least when he argues like a logician and when he theorizes.

Plotinus affirms that ugliness and evil are one. Nothing by itself and in itself is evil. To affirm that any part of being, as such, is evil, is, to my mind, to accept evil as an ultimate principle, to admit evil as an original dimension of ultimate reality. A thing is evil when and in so far as it disrupts integrity, impairs perfection, or impedes possible perfection.

“No eye that has not become like unto the sun will ever look upon the sun; nor will any that is not beautiful look upon the beautiful. Let each one therefore become godlike and beautiful who would contemplate the divine and beautiful.” As I have often said, it is by ourselves becoming real that we know reality. The reality that we know is our reality. We know no other reality. Yet we are justified in saying that thus we know Reality, because we are grounded in that Reality.

Plotinus’s Trinity, the Primal Hypostases: The One, The Intelligence, The Soul, was probably the source of the Christian Trinity. However, Plotinus’s own Trinity has roots that strike far back into the history of human thought. For some reason humans seem to have seen the number three as endowed

with special sanctity. In Indian thought we have the Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva. In Homer we find Zeus, Athena, and Apollo, addressed collectively in a single supplication. And here in Egypt we have the triad of Amun and Mut with their son Khonsu. So it is no wonder that though the Fourth Gospel of the Christian canon speaks only of God and the Logos, the founders of the Christian doctrine responded to the urge for completing the trinity by elevating the Holy Spirit – which earlier had only been assigned a lowly role – to full parity and unity with the Father and the Logos-become-Son.

Plotinus is most inspiring when he gives oracular expression to the Platonic vision, less so when he displays his Aristotelean discipline of thought.

None of Plotinus's Aristotelean questions – such as “Is The Intelligence separable?” “Is The Soul simple or complex?” – is capable of a final answer. No answer to such questions can be said to be true or false. For these questions are not questions about actualities.

This does not make them meaningless or nonsensical. They are not scientific but philosophical questions. They are not factual questions, questions about what is the case, but questions about meaning. They open up for us vistas of meaningful formulations that can create diverse ideal systems, each internally self-consistent, coherent, and therefore meaningful. They create for us distinct universes of discourse, in which the mind can actively exercise its life of intelligence and enjoy understanding.

This is the exercise of pure reason, unrelated to actualities. This is akin to the enjoyment of imaginative poetry whether epical, dramatic or lyrical. This is akin to the enjoyment of pure form in music. This is the rationale and justification of grand metaphysical systems, the creation of which is verily the creation of real worlds, as real as the worlds God incessantly creates.

This is what I mean when I say that the philosopher is not concerned with the factual or with the discovery of truth, but is concerned solely with the creation of meaningful worlds so as to live in intelligent creativity, to live the life of creative intelligence.

Alas! when a philosopher defiles the ideal world she or he has created, vesting it with false actuality, she or he does not sin against the truth but

against her or his own reality. She or he then, like King Midas, trades her or his soul for a hulk of venial gold.

Plotinus was hampered and his philosophy weakened by his combination of Aristoteleanism with Platonism. What some laud as rationality in his philosophy I see as a fault, showing a misunderstanding of the nature of philosophical thinking.

Plotinus says of Heraclitus that “he engages in metaphor and is little concerned with explaining”, of Empedocles that “he speaks as a poet”, and of Plato that “consistency is not his strong point”. What Plotinus says of all three thinkers is just, but his dissatisfaction is unjustified. Poetry and metaphor are proper media for philosophy and complete consistency in a philosophical system is a mark of narrowness and want of originality. Plato was a poet, spoke in metaphor and myth, and dared to be inconsistent precisely because his philosophy was profound, of majestic span, and highly original. That is why he will always remain master to original philosophers not docile disciples.

In identifying the Good and the One, Plotinus does not depart from the essence of Plato’s thought. Plato does not make the identification explicitly because Plato is consistently averse to confining his thought within any fixed theoretical compass. But when Plato speaks of the one and the many, we see that it is in the One that the many find their reality; and when we ask, What is real?, we arrive at the idea of the Good, and the Good breeds all particular beings — the many. In Plato as in Plotinus, Reality, the Good, Intelligence, the Whole are all one, and they are the One.

What is unplatonic in Plotinus is not to be found in the thought or the expression or the images, but in the fact that Plotinus glories in theoretical fixity, or, to put it more generously, in theoretical completeness and orderliness. Yet Plotinus redeems this by his insistence on the incomprehensibility of the One. His philosophical expression is fixed, but not the Reality it expresses. This fixity is in the determinate system, but the system itself acknowledges that Reality transcends all determinateness.

This is philosophically sensible, but it is fraught with danger for the unwary. To escape the danger, enjoy your Plotinus, share his insights, but don't take his formulations too seriously; don't turn his philosophy into a religion — that was what killed Pythagoreanism.

Plotinus affirms that “awareness of The One comes to us neither by knowing nor by the pure thought that discovers the other intelligible things, but by a presence transcending knowledge.” The ‘presence transcending knowledge’ is what I would call the immediacy of the experience of our moral reality, or, in another formulation, our awareness of the creative intelligence which is our proper reality.

Just as Plato found it necessary to emphasize explicitly in his late works what had always been implicit in his early works, namely, that our conception of reality would be defective without our seeing *dunamis* and the creative urge as original in ultimate Reality, so also Plotinus had to have recourse to the concept of *tolma* as the urge that brings forth the universe.

But the Pythagorean-Plotinian *tolma*, coloured by the negative attitude of the Pythagoreans and Plotinus to the world, was viewed as a principle of degeneration. I prefer to see it with the saner eyes of Plato as the essential creativity of the Good.

Let us say that ultimate Reality, the Good, as the primordial Act, is purposive, and purpose is affirmation, and affirmation is Love. Ultimate Reality is Creative Eternity: Creative Eternity is the Act: the Act is Love. Let me confess to you that this sums up the metaphysics that I arrived at in my early teens and that it continued to be the foundation for all my subsequent thought.

The system of Plotinus can be seen as a religion. But it is not harmful as religion is harmful because it is presented as an individual thinker's expression of his insight into his own spiritual reality. A religion becomes harmful once it is institutionalized. A philosophical system also becomes harmful when endowed with authority and fixity. Plato remains the best of philosophers because you cannot beat his thought into a finished system.

Plato gives us problems to exercise our intelligence. He gives us notions to be explored and developed. While religions and philosophical systems that pride themselves on their theoretical perfection enslave, Plato's philosophy liberates. The worst harm comes from religions that combine authority with power.

Plotinus says, "That beyond Being there exists The One we have attempted to prove as far as such an assertion admits of proof." Thus Plotinus, like Plato, acknowledges that philosophical statements – the expression of philosophical insights – are not demonstrable.

It would be meaningless to say 'are not strictly demonstrable' or 'are not ultimately demonstrable', for a statement is either demonstrable or not demonstrable – there is no middle condition. The notion of probability has its place in relation to things that are essentially contingent but not in the realm of principles. The so-called 'proofs' adduced by good philosophers – such as Plato's 'proofs' in the *Phaedo* – are explorations of a notion. They do not prove; they clarify, they demonstrate in the etymological sense of the term, that is, they show.

Demonstration in the stricter logical sense is possible only within a closed system whose basic terms and first principles remain unquestioned. This is the area of the sciences, primarily mathematics. But philosophy, as Plato says in the *Republic*, cannot stop there.

Philosophical thinking, to be strictly philosophical, must destroy all its grounds, to discover its true character as mythical proclamation of insight into our inner reality. That is what I mean when I say that philosophy is oracular. Philosophy is concerned with truthfulness but lays no claim to truth; institutionalized religion sacrifices truthfulness on the altar of its presumptuous truth.

Plotinus says, "In order that being be, The One must be not being but being's begetter." I say, for the existence of the actual multiplicity of the world to be intelligible, we have to conceive of ultimate Reality as Creative Eternity. It is Eternity because it is beyond the temporal and it is creative because otherwise the actuality of the world would be unintelligible.

“Never has the cosmos been without a soul, nor was there a time when body existed in the absence of soul or when matter was without form. But in discussion we can consider them separately: it is always legitimate, when reasoning about any kind of composite, to break it down, in thought, into its parts, soul and body, matter and form.” Here Plotinus clearly acknowledges that reality attaches only to the whole. But Plotinus often seems forgetful of this. Generally, in expounding his views and in arguing for them he talks as if the ideal distinctions he draws have finality and fixity. Plato’s language also sometimes suggests this. But Plato never allows any theoretical position to stand unshaken long enough to congeal into dogma. Like a child building castles of sand on the sea-shore, no sooner has he cried out in exultation and pride at the structure he has built than he demolishes it to build anew. That is why Plato is the philosopher that best liberates the mind.

Plotinus is prone to error also in that when he gives his imaginative accounts of how things come to be and of the relations of the various powers, principles, and aspects of being, he takes his own account as if it were a report of fact. Plato told myths and called them myths and when he affirmed there was true insight in those myths he never subjected that insight to bonds or bounds; he left us free to receive that insight as a lived experience. Let me remind you once again at this point that when I speak of Plato’s myths I am not referring primarily to his well-known *muthoi* in the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Gorgias*, the *Republic*, or the *Statesman*, but to all his conceptual and theoretical formulations.

Plato has not left us a philosophy: they gravely wrong Plato those who seek to ascribe to him a finished system. Plato has given us what is infinitely more important: he has given us the gift of philosophizing. Plotinus has presented Plato’s insights in beautiful and inspiring images and ideal structures. We gravely err if we stop at Plotinus’s images and ideal patterns, allowing them to stand between us and the living springs of Plato. We honour Plotinus best when we let him take us back to Plato’s inspiring allusiveness and beyond that to Socrates’ philosophical ignorance.

Plotinus says that the soul “uses reasoning when it is uncertain, when it is full of distractions, and especially when it is weakened because to need to reason is the result of a weakening of the intelligence, which no longer is sufficient unto itself. Reasoning intervenes in craftsmanship when the craftsman encounters difficulties; when there is no difficulty the

craftsmanship proceeds under its own power.” This is highly perceptive. In all creative work, in poetry, in philosophizing, in composing music or simply letting our feelings flow out spontaneously in song; in an unpremeditated gesture of love, act of charity, or heroic deed; in all of these, when human nature is at its best and noblest and freest, we do not reason, but – let me avoid being too definite – something in us gushes forth in spontaneous expression — the poem, the thought, the song, the gesture, the deed, is a flowering of our inner reality. This is what I mean in advancing the principle of creativity as an ultimate feature of reality.

In this I also find the solution to the riddle of free will. If all events, including human action, are subject to the principle of sufficient reason, if all states of being that come to be proceed from their antecedents, how is that compatible with human freedom? My answer, in brief, is: all becoming is creative; creativity is freedom; human activity at its best and finest is both in full conformity with the principle of sufficient reason and with freedom. No event, not even the tritest of commonplace happenings, is determined, is constrained, by its antecedents; yet all events, the lowliest and the highest, answer to their antecedents, creatively fulfil their antecedents, are flowerings of their antecedents — choose the metaphor you like, they are all equally true and equally imperfect. Those who find a problem here confound freedom with deliberation and choice. We reason, deliberate, and choose, when the elements of the situation lie beyond us, when we and our action are only a factor among other factors of the situation. Then we are not truly free; in that sense we are never truly free. We are free when our action is an outpouring of our inner reality.

Sources

See “Foreword and Acknowledgements” for the main sources for Hypatia’s life and for the myth of Isis and Osiris.

Hypatia’s ‘lectures’ on the Parmenides

For the first four sections of Mariam’s Book (dealing with Plato’s *Parmenides*, pp.60-67 above) I have reproduced chapter 8 of my *Plato: An Interpretation* (2005), with some omissions and a few minor alterations.

Citations from Plato

Plato’s words: “He who sees things as a whole is philosophical, he who doesn’t, isn’t”, quoted twice above, p.20 and p.61, are from the *Republic*, 537c: *ho men gar sunoptikos dialektikos, ho de mê ou*.

Passages quoted from the Enneads of Plotinus

For the quotations from the *Enneads* of Plotinus I have used the translation of Elmer O’Brien, S.J., in *The Essential Plotinus* (1964). In the references below, the Roman figure and following two Arabic numerals refer to the number of the Ennead, the treatise, and the section respectively. The numbers within brackets refer to the page number in the Mentor Book edition of *The Essential Plotinus*, First Printing, April, 1964.

“Bodies are by their bodies kept from union, but the bodiless are not held by this bodily limitation. What separates bodiless beings from one another is not spatial distance but their own differences and diversities: when there is no difference between them, they are mutually present.” VI.9.8 (p.84).

“Life here below in the midst of sense objects is for the soul a degradation, an exile, a loss of wings” VI.9.9 (p.85).

“No eye that has not become like unto the sun will ever look upon the sun; nor will any that is not beautiful look upon the beautiful. Let each one therefore become godlike and beautiful who would contemplate the divine and beautiful.” I.6.9 (p.43).

“.. awareness of The One comes to us neither by knowing nor by the pure thought that discovers the other intelligible things, but by a presence transcending knowledge.” VI.9.4 (p.78).

“That beyond Being there exists The One we have attempted to prove as far as such an assertion admits of proof.” V.1.10 (p.102).

“In order that being be, The One must be not being but being’s begetter.” V.2.1 (p.107).

“Never has the cosmos been without a soul, nor was there a time when body existed in the absence of soul or when matter was without form. But in discussion we can consider them separately: it is always legitimate, when reasoning about any kind of composite, to break it down, in thought, into its parts, soul and body, matter and form.” IV.3.9 (p.137).

.. the soul “uses reasoning when it is uncertain, when it is full of distractions, and especially when it is weakened because to need to reason is the result of a weakening of the intelligence, which no longer is sufficient unto itself. Reasoning intervenes in craftsmanship when the craftsman encounters difficulties; when there is no difficulty the craftsmanship proceeds under its own power.” IV.3.18 (p.145).

For Plotinus’s remarks on Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Plato I am indebted to O’Brien’s comment on p.59.

An anachronism?

“Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty” (p.79). In *Socrates’ Prison Journal* (2005) I purposely introduced many anachronisms. In the present work I was careful to avoid anachronism. However, I thought there was no harm in adopting Keats’ inspired words here, since the notion they express is one that could very well have occurred to Hypatia.

Bible citations

“For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.” Matthew, 25:29.

“.. not what goes into the mouth defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a person.” Matthw, 15:11.

“But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Matthew, 5:28.

Hypatia's imaginary portrait

For the frontispiece imaginary portrait I am indebted to the website www.astr.ua.edu/4000WS/HYPATIA.html.